

SPECIAL REPORT: JAMES FALLOW'S ON THE GREENING OF CHINA

THE Atlantic

JUNE 2008

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THE SKY IS FALLING

IT'S INEVITABLE: ASTEROIDS WITH THE POWER TO ANNIHILATE US WILL COME THIS WAY. CAN NASA DIVERT THEM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE?

BY GREGG EASTERBROOK

THE OBAMA FILES:

HIS AMAZING MONEY MACHINE

HIS ACCIDENTAL FOREIGN POLICY

HIS POTENTIAL INTERNET PRESIDENCY

PLUS:

THE TRIUMPH OF
BARBARA WALTERS
BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

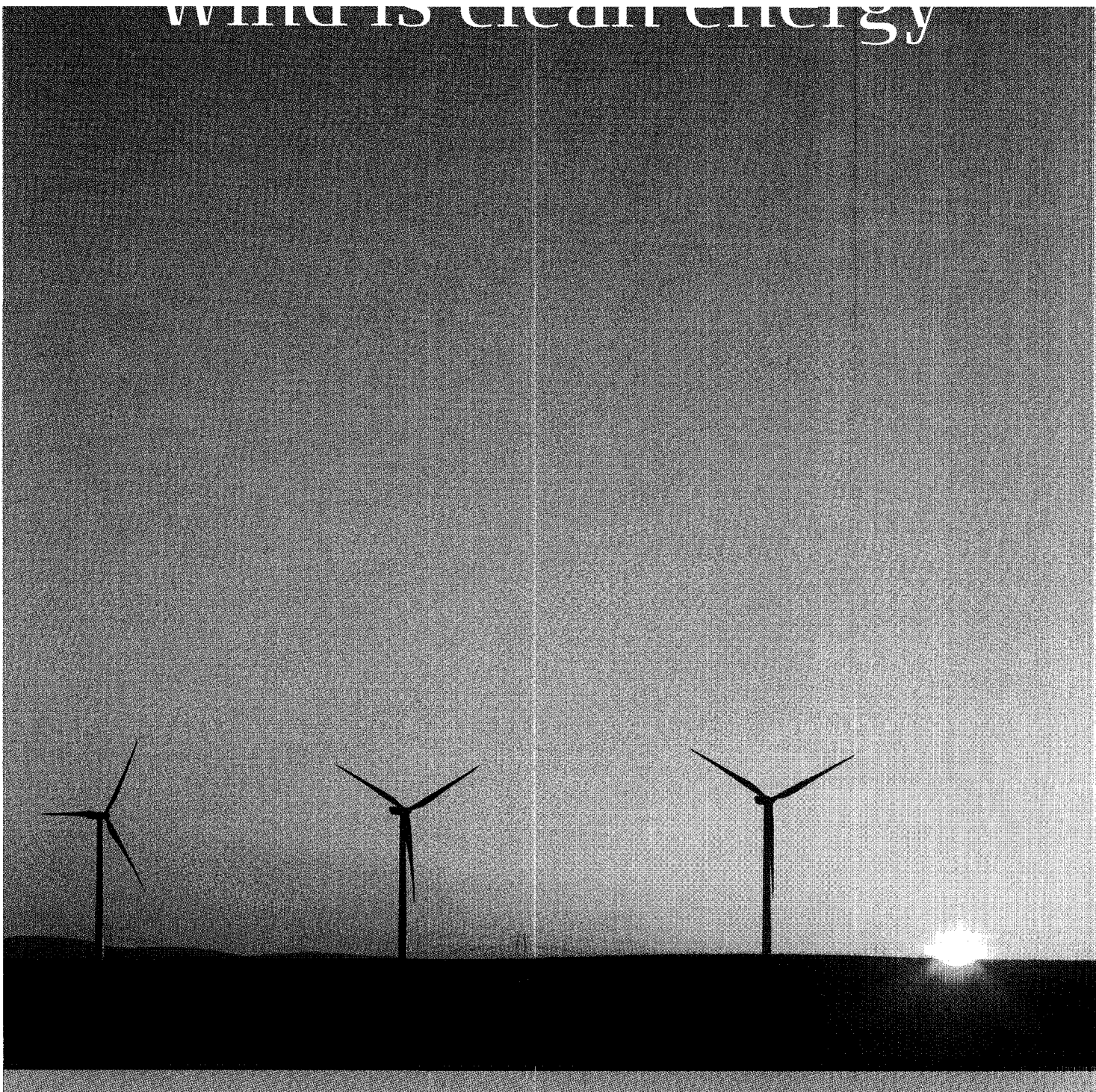
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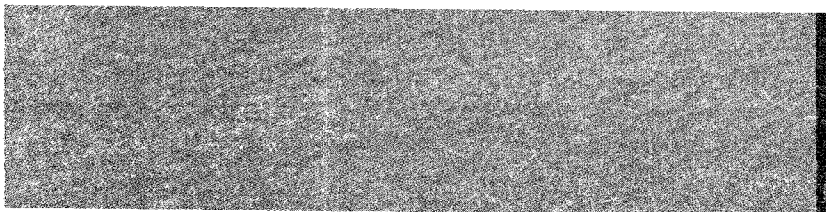
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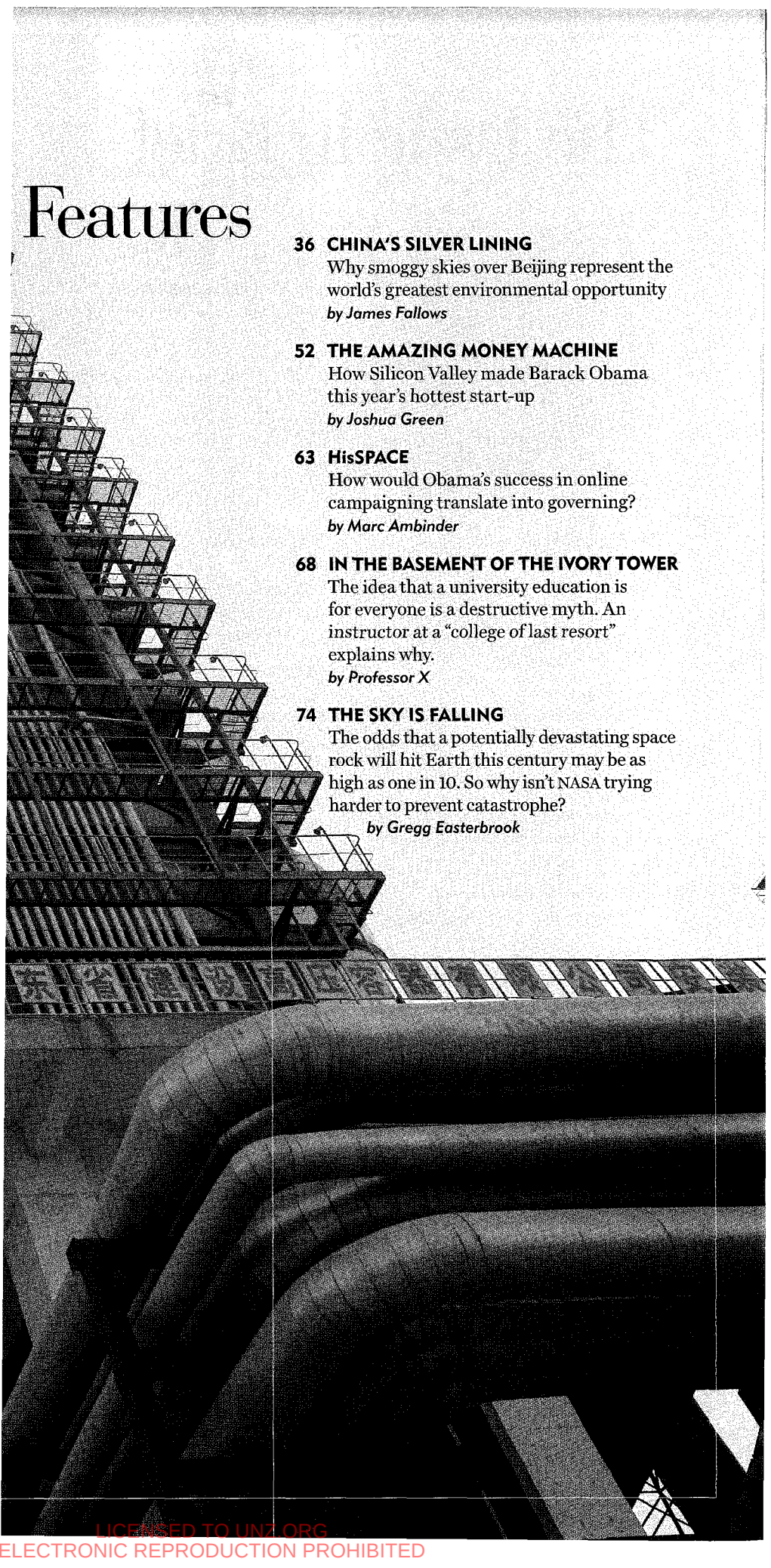
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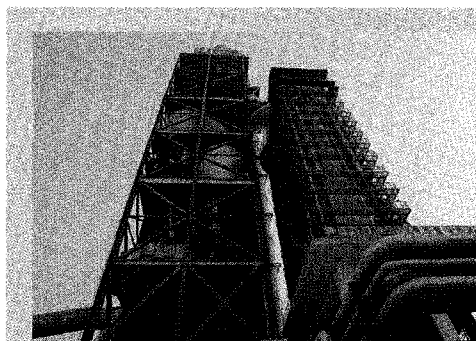
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by Gregg Easterbrook

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THE **Atlantic**

JUNE 2008 | VOLUME 301 | NUMBER 5



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PHOTO BY ARIANA LINDQUIST

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Illustration by Joe Zeff Design, Inc.

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by Istvan Banyai

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Joshua Kurlantzick, author of this month's Travels article, narrates photos of the saloons, steak houses, and cowhands of northeast Thailand.

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VIDEO: TARGET EARTH

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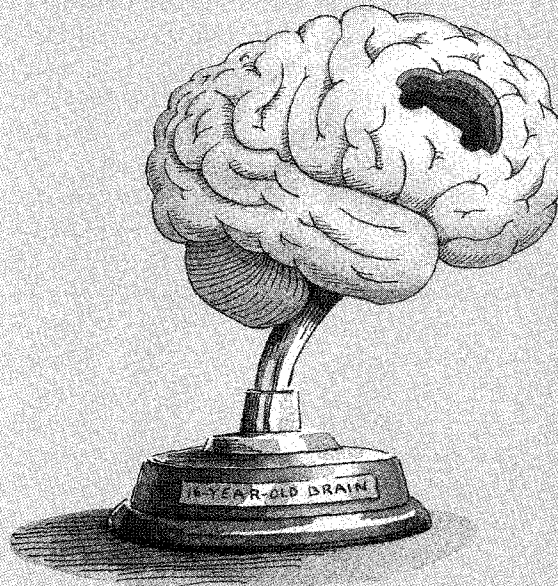
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Why do most 16-year-olds drive like they're *missing a part of their brain?*



BECAUSE THEY ARE.



EVEN BRIGHT, MATURE TEENAGERS SOMETIMES DO THINGS THAT ARE "STUPID."

But when that happens, it's not really their fault. It's because their brain hasn't finished developing. The underdeveloped area is called the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex. It plays a critical role in decision making, problem solving and understanding future consequences of today's actions. Problem is, it won't be fully mature until they're into their 20s.

It's one reason 16-year-old drivers have crash rates three times higher than 17-year-olds and five times higher than 18-year-olds. **Car crashes injure about 300,000 teens a year. And kill more than 5,000.** Is there a way for teens to get their driving experience more safely—giving their brains time to mature as completely as their bodies? Allstate thinks so.

Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) laws are one approach that's been proven effective at reducing

teen crashes. These laws restrict the more dangerous kinds of driving teens do, such as nighttime driving and driving with teen passengers. When North Carolina implemented one of the most comprehensive GDL laws in the country, it saw a 25% decline in crashes involving 16-year-olds.

To find out what the GDL laws are in your state, visit Allstate.com/teen. Help enforce them—and if they aren't strong enough, ask your legislator to strengthen them.

Let's help our teenagers not miss out on tomorrow just because they have something missing today.

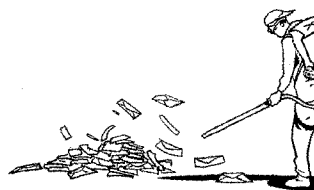
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



JUNE 2008 THE ATLANTIC

THE BRITNEY SHOW

I understand that magazines—especially urbane ones such as *The Atlantic*—are facing difficult times right now, but if your recent Britney Spears cover story (“Shooting Britney,” April *Atlantic*) is part of a larger effort to ameliorate that struggle, then it will surely misfire. Rather than win subscribers from the *In Touch* crowd, the move is far more likely to alienate your present readers. I have always respected *The Atlantic*’s eclectic array of subjects, even when not covering those of global significance. Be it a travelogue of Africa’s Skeleton Coast, a look at contemporary book releases, or an examination of modern Chinese artists, I always came away feeling somehow enriched. This cover story tells me nothing I could not have gleaned from an episode of *Access Hollywood*.

Just weeks after this issue hit the stands, the nation was rocked by the collapse of Bear Stearns and now faces an economic cloud darker and more ominous than any seen in 50 years. Many Americans stand to lose far more than their respect for a fading pop diva. It is my hope that a place can be found to deliver care and insight to these and other pressing matters of state.

Joshua Goldfond
New York, N.Y.

I must admit that one of the things I have always loved (and hated) about *The Atlantic* was that I often found myself reading with a fine-point marker, circling the words I could not readily define. I’ve always felt richer from this process as I plodded along in articles that were sometimes—shall we dare say it?—boring. But, heaven forbid, you’re breaking new ground—a lengthy article about The Brit? In *The Atlantic*?

I must say, I was skeptical when I saw the issue’s cover. But what a delightful reporting and writing job by David

Samuels. I can only hope that his fee for letting me drop my marker and enjoy a story about a world and a demographic that confuses and bemuses me is higher than the fee for the pictures used to illustrate his informative—or should I say entertaining?—piece of journalism.

I wonder if the article’s subject will read it or understand *any* of the words? Probably not. Despite her income, she doesn’t fit your demographic targets. Thanks for taking a chance on this story for readers who probably couldn’t care less about this tragic young woman.

Jim Beck
Evansville, Ind.

SLUMMING IT

Christopher Leinberger is correct in predicting the decline of suburban communities and a renewed interest in city living (“The Next Slum?,” March *Atlantic*). As a former professional remodeler with a decade of experience researching and writing about residential architecture, however, I have to say that Leinberger’s description of the ills of newer suburban homes misses the mark.

There are some noteworthy differences in the quality of older and newer housing stock, but Leinberger’s wholesale nostalgia is misleading. Every city has had its share of substandard housing; time and redevelopment often claim these structures, while their better-built peers survive and create the impression of a former golden age of quality. Some of these buildings do surpass newer homes, but not because today’s structural materials are necessarily shoddy. Properly installed, neither plywood subflooring nor asphalt roof shingles suffer from the rapid degradation Leinberger describes, and his suggestion that many newer homes rely on drywall for their structural integrity is absurd. Legal codes govern virtually every aspect of home building; no such compromised structure would

ever receive either a building permit or a certificate of occupancy.

Two factors share responsibility for the banality and inhospitality of suburban homes and neighborhoods. One is the widespread use of engineered finish materials, especially plastics, because of their lower initial cost and minimal maintenance requirements.

Worse than the shortcomings of materials, though, are the design and marketing trends that equate more square footage with quality and that give undue prominence to automobiles. Huge entryways, vaulted ceilings, and up-front garages for three vehicles are “impressive” features that undermine the modest comforts and human scale that make many older homes inherently appealing. So much money goes into making new homes larger that the craftsmanship and premium materials that create true quality are either used sparingly or jettisoned entirely to cut costs. This gaudy “go big” aesthetic shapes neighborhoods as well, creating public spaces scaled to motor-vehicle traffic and unfriendly to pedestrians. Affluent residents eventually find some place more satisfying to live, while poorer citizens with fewer choices move in to take advantage of lower housing costs. It’s an old pattern with a new twist, which in this case is the suburbs’ unexpected fall from grace.

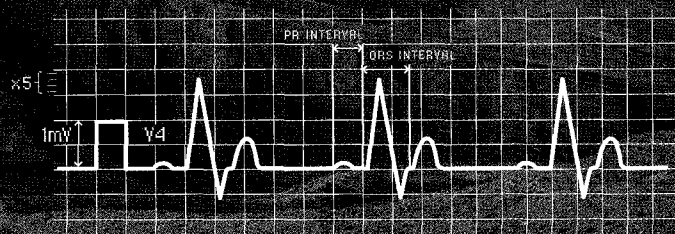
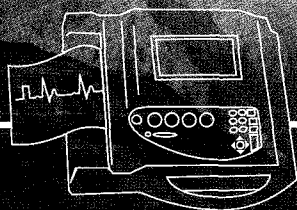
Bill LaHay
Des Moines, Iowa

Christopher Leinberger does a disservice to your readers and to the East Franklin neighborhood of Elk Grove, California, by cribbing from other published reports to craft an anecdotal lead for a story that’s more about urban revival than suburban decline. Had Leinberger done some original reporting—instead of repeating an oft-published quote that was taken out of context—he might have discovered that thousands of residents

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enjoy living in East Franklin. Like many communities across the country, it has been affected by the mortgage crisis, but it's grossly inaccurate to report that "graffiti, broken windows, and other markers of decay have multiplied."

The community has good public schools, a new public library, superb parks, and an abundance of nature and green space. East Franklin has had some growing pains, most of them due to the phenomenal run-up of housing prices, but with the community now virtually built out, many here feel good about the prospects for the future.

Furthermore, only a very small fraction of the 20,000-plus people who live here are members of the Franklin Reserve Neighborhood Association, so it's a stretch to say Susan McDonald's group is "the local residents' association."

Tom Couzens
President, Board of Directors
Wisteria Place Homeowners
Association
Elk Grove, Calif.

Christopher Leinberger replies:

I find little to disagree with in Bill LaHay's comments. However, "whole-sale nostalgia" is not what this piece is about. I certainly recognize that we get a selective view of the past; only the structures that are both sturdy enough and architecturally beloved are maintained and renovated for posterity. But the percentage of poorly built structures, both residential and commercial, must be at a record high today compared with, say, the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For residential structures, one reason for cheaper construction is consumer demand for bigger and bigger houses, which LaHay mentions. This has required home builders to find a thousand different ways to cut construction costs, including the use of two-by-six wood-frame construction and thin drywall, the latter providing the structural stability in many starter homes I referred to in the article.

A second reason why housing has recently been built more cheaply is to allow for the cost of the cars required to

make fringe suburban housing work. In most suburban households, every driving-age adult must have a car to connect to work, school, friends, and shopping. As a result, Americans have been shifting their household budgets from a generally appreciating asset, their house, to a depreciating asset, their fleet of cars. (AAA reports that, in 2007, owning and operating the average car cost \$7,871.)

I certainly did not want to mischaracterize anyone's neighborhood. One's home, and neighborhood, is not only an emotional foundation of family life but the largest asset on most households' balance sheets. As I stated in the article, the subprime-mortgage meltdown will not drag down every drivable suburban neighborhood. But the mortgage crisis shows that residential neighborhoods are by their very nature fragile places. Because these neighborhoods are continually dependent on residential property taxes, when communities stop growing—and especially when they face a cyclical or structural downturn in value—they do not have any fiscal options. Revenues go flat or decline while the need for social and police services goes up.

To avoid this tenuous state of affairs, committed property owners need to band together, as I'm guessing Tom Couzens's organization has done, to slow down or reverse threats of market and tax decline.

CROSS AND CRESCENT

I am a Nigerian from Plateau State in the Middle Belt of Nigeria—a focus of Eliza Griswold's piece, "God's Country" (March Atlantic)—and my wife comes from Qua'an Pan Local Government Area, where Yelwa is situated. My wife's grandmother had her house and a modest hotel in Yelwa burnt by arsonists during the events Ms. Griswold reports on.

Though the divisions between the Hausa-Fulani traders and the communities that mainly practiced subsistence agriculture have religious elements, I maintain that the problems between the groups are due to ethnic struggles for influence and power rather than religion. In many instances, Christian girls were ostracized for being "bought" by

wealthy Hausa-Fulani Muslims. But in the Shendam and Qua'an Pan Local Government areas of Plateau State, many aborigines have peacefully and voluntarily converted to Islam. In fact, it is often easier for a Catholic girl to marry a Muslim than a Protestant. There is a very large Yoruba Muslim community in Jos, which settled there in colonial times to serve the tin-mining industry and to carry on trade. There has never been a clash between them and the people they have settled among.

The fundamental issue is a struggle for political dominance. Quite often, the flash point is a land dispute that rapidly consumes communities divided over identity. An example is the 1999 violence that engulfed the city of Jos and the surrounding areas dominated by the Berom ethnic group in response to perceived usurpations by Hausa-Fulani settlers. This was reprised in 2001 on an even larger scale between the same central protagonists, with other ethnic groups pitching in against the Muslim Hausa-Fulani. Jos is now divided de facto into "Christian" and "Muslim" neighborhoods, although Muslims who are not Hausa-Fulani feel secure staying in Christian areas.

James Bot
Accra, Ghana

Eliza Griswold replies:

I am grateful for James Bot's thoughtful reflection, and for his reminder that it is religious identity, rather than religion itself, that has become a dominant factor in conflicts over land, resources, and politics in contemporary Nigeria. Identity is a matter of how we imagine ourselves and why. This is about power, not faith.

Editors' Note:

The paper "Women's Increasing Wage Penalties From Being Overweight and Obese" (Primary Sources, March Atlantic) should not have been identified as a Bureau of Labor Statistics paper. It was selected as a Bureau of Labor Statistics Working Paper because it cited data from the BLS, but its author is not an employee of the BLS. We regret the error.



essential₂ahhh!

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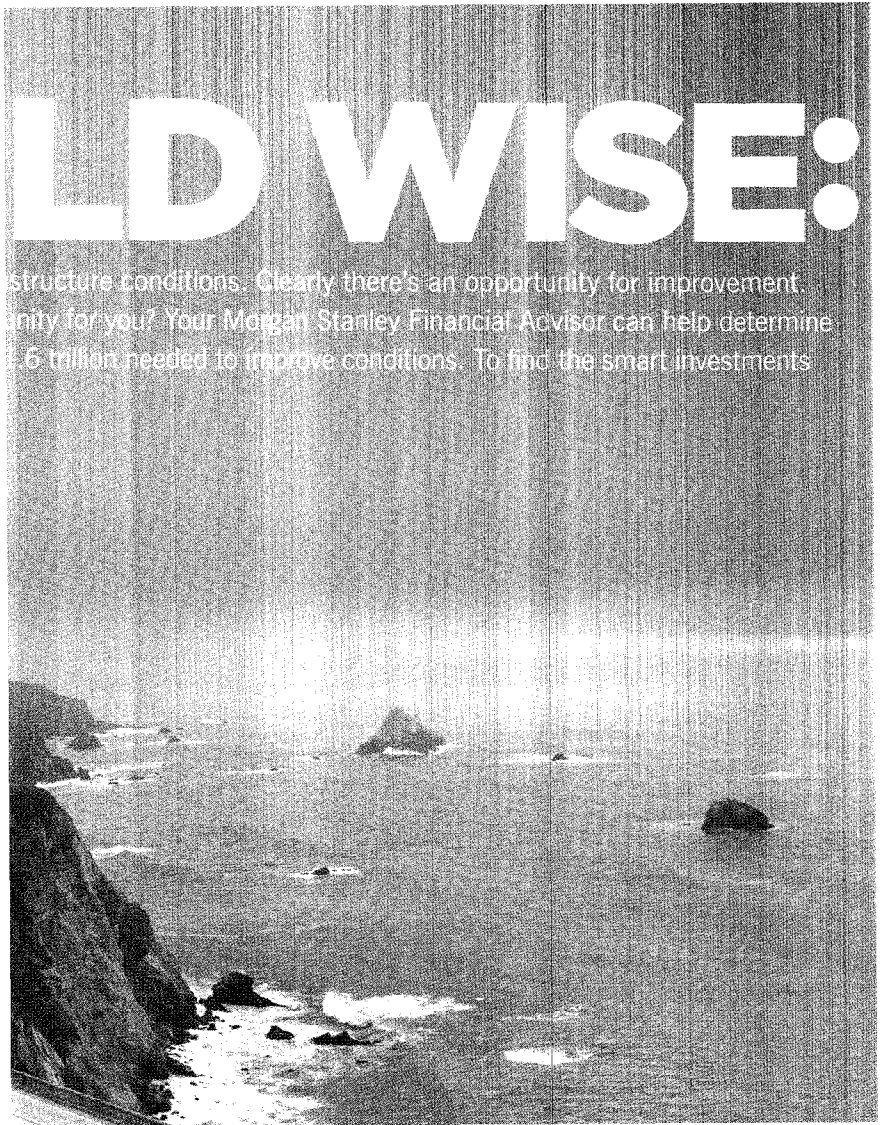
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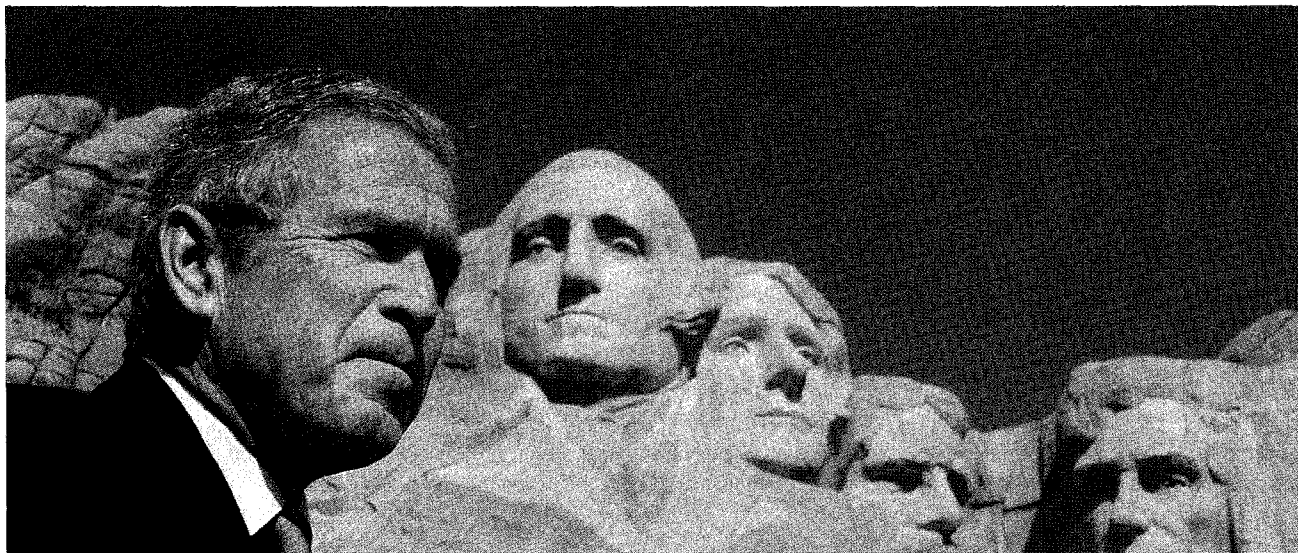
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THE AGENDA

JUNE 2008 THE ATLANTIC



COMMENT

The national memory often confuses hubris with greatness.
That's good news for George W. Bush.

Redeeming Dubya

BY ROSS DOUTHAT

The idea that history might rehabilitate George W. Bush seems too ludicrous to be seriously entertained. His approval ratings have been so low for so long, it's hard to remember that he was ever popular. The Iraq War, his signal endeavor, has lasted for more years than America's involvement in the Second World War and seems likely to last longer; a fragile truce in a wrecked, misgoverned country is the best the next president can hope for.

Even many of the president's ideological allies consider him a failure—either a false conservative who betrayed the Reagan legacy, or a blunderer who got the big decisions right but couldn't follow through. His liberal foes, whose bill of indictments has swollen to the size of

Gravity's Rainbow, while away the hours until January 2009 by arguing over just how terrible a president he's been. The worst since Nixon? Since Hoover? Since James Buchanan?

If Bush himself were confronted with this discouraging analysis, though, it's easy to imagine his retort—delivered, no doubt, with a flash of that famous smirk: *So you're saying I've got nowhere to go but up.*

Before you laugh, consider that nearly every presidential reputation, however tarnished, eventually finds someone willing to defend it. At the very least, some right-wing writers and historians will rise to defend Bush's legacy. But something more than partisan apologetics will be needed for his presidency to be remembered

as something other than a failure. Ronald Reagan's status became secure only after left-of-center historians began to praise him; likewise, Harry Truman's reputation has risen from the Bush-esque depths of his disastrous second term in part because Republicans as well as Democrats have come to claim him as a hero.

Which means that to earn the sort of vindication he seems to blithely expect, George W. Bush will have to win over not only centrists but at least some liberals.

Again, stifle that laugh. Bush won over a certain sort of liberal once before, the crusading, hawkish sort that felt the tug of Bush's moral certainty after 9/11 and was moved—at least until Iraq turned sour—by his confidence in America's ability to remake the world.

Imagining that these liberals, and others, might be won over again requires two big assumptions. First, assume that the years immediately after Bush leaves office pass without domestic calamity. If the current economic downturn becomes another Great Depression, for instance, his reputation will be buried as deep as Hoover's or Buchanan's. If America continues to muddle through, however, Bush's domestic record—which is lackluster without being nearly as bad as his critics, left and right, often claim it's been—will probably vanish down the memory hole that has swallowed the domestic record of nearly every president not named Roosevelt or Johnson.

This is the easy part of the equation. The harder assumption involves what will remain after “compassionate conservatism” has faded into the same oblivion

the country—no one should be surprised to hear hawkish liberals as well as conservatives taking up the idea that George W. Bush deserves a great deal of the credit.

I do not mean to suggest that this is a likely outcome, or that it would be a just one. The cost of the Iraq War, in lives and dollars and squandered opportunities, ought to far outweigh the possibility that a long-term American presence might push the Middle East in a direction it was headed anyway. But when things work out in the long run—and especially when we can claim the credit—Americans tend to forgive their leaders for the crimes and errors of the moment.

That's why—to judge by the rankings that historians and pollsters regularly churn out—we've forgiven Teddy Roosevelt his role in the bloody and disgraceful occupation of the Philippines.

Bush hopes to benefit from the consonance between his sweeping goals and the gradual upward trajectory in human affairs.

that claimed Nixon's “New Federalism” and Bill Clinton's “New Covenant.” Foreign policy, that is, where for history's judgment to turn favorable, America's intervention in Iraq eventually needs to come out looking like a success story rather than a folly.

This seems improbable, to put it mildly. But the crucial word here is *eventually*. The Bush administration has often seemed bent on vindicating, in the short run and by force of arms, Francis Fukuyama's famous *long-term* prediction that liberal democracy will ultimately triumph. Now Bush's hopes for vindication depend on the Middle East's following a gradual, Fukuyaman track toward free markets, democratic government, and the “end of history.” And just as crucially, they depend on American troops' staying in Iraq for as long as it takes for that to happen. If these events come to pass—if the Iraq of 2038 or so is stable, democratic, and at peace with its neighbors, and if American troops have maintained a constant presence in

It's why we've pardoned Woodrow Wilson for the part his feckless idealism played in unleashing decades of strife and tyranny in Europe. It's why we've granted Harry Truman absolution for the military blundering that prolonged the Korean War and brought us to the brink of nuclear conflict.

All of these presidents benefited, as Bush hopes to benefit, from the consonance between their sweeping, often hubristic goals and the gradual upward trajectory in human affairs. Despite our crimes, the Philippines turned out well enough in the long run, and so did South Korea; in the very long run, so did post-World War I Europe. (Indeed, if LBJ or Nixon had only found a way to prop up South Vietnam until the 1990s, they might have been forgiven the outrageous cost in blood and treasure, and remembered as Trumanesque heroes rather than as goats.)

But these well-respected presidents have benefited, as well, from the American

tendency to overvalue activist leaders. So a bad president like Wilson is preferred, in our rankings and our hearts, to a good but undistinguished manager like Calvin Coolidge. A sometimes impressive, oft-erratic president like Truman is lionized, while the more even-keeled greatness of Dwight D. Eisenhower is persistently undervalued. John F. Kennedy is hailed for escaping the Cuban missile crisis, which his own misjudgments set in motion, while George H. W. Bush, who steered the U.S. through the fraught final moments of the Cold War with admirable caution, is caricatured as a ditherer who needed Margaret Thatcher around to keep him from going wobbly.

Few presidents have seemed as conscious of this reality as George W. Bush, perhaps because he had the example of his father—competent, cautious, and defeated for reelection—to look back on. The younger Bush's governing style has been defined by an attempt to be everything his father wasn't: by the pursuit of greatness, rather than mere competence; by an impatience with “small ball” and a yearning to play what *The Weekly Standard's* Fred Barnes called the “rebel in chief”; by rhetoric that associated him as much with crusading liberals like Wilson and Kennedy as with his Republican predecessors; and by an abiding faith that his goals would earn him history's blessing, whatever today's polls might say.

In this sense, it might be said that a too-keen awareness of the American tendency to associate great leadership with world-historical ambition has wrecked the presidency of George W. Bush. But the enthusiasm for Barack Obama and John McCain suggests that the yearning, on the left and right alike, for presidents who will pursue greatness has only been enhanced by the debacle in Iraq. This is good news for Bush, who has to hope that the same propensity that ruined his administration will redeem his reputation. But it's dangerous news for America. Those who rehabilitate the follies of the past are condemned to repeat them. ▀

Ross Douthat is an Atlantic senior editor and the co-author of *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*, out this month.



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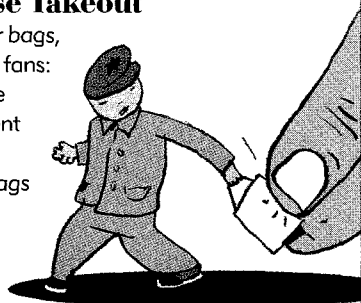


What to watch for in the weeks ahead Calendar

COMPILED BY MATTHEW QUIRK

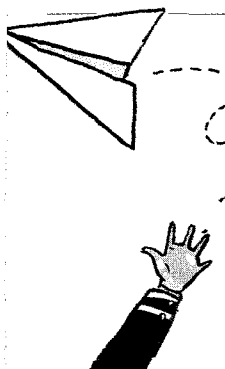
JUNE Chinese Takeout

1 Pack your bags, Olympics fans: effective today, the Chinese government has banned free plastic shopping bags to steer citizens toward carts and cloth sacks.



JUNE Cabin Fever

1 FEMA intends to move the tens of thousands of victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita still living in "temporary" trailers into other housing by today, the official start of hurricane season. In February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention discovered potentially dangerous levels of formaldehyde in the trailers.



JUNE Punched Out

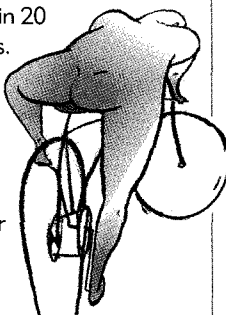
1 The paper airline ticket is about to depart. The International Air Transport Association, which represents 94 percent of international scheduled air traffic, has ordered its last paper tickets and will switch to electronic ticketing beginning today.

JUNE Sorcerer's Apprentices

5 Although Harry Potter never did graduate from Hogwarts, his creator, J. K. Rowling, dons a cap and gown today to deliver Harvard's commencement address.

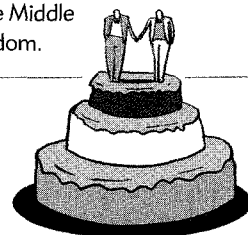
JUNE Free Riders

7 The World Naked Bike Ride (a series of rides, really) starts in the U.S. this weekend. Nude cyclists first took to the streets in 2004 to draw attention to oil dependency, bike safety, and, of course, themselves. They now rally annually in about 70 cities in 20 countries. Riders are encouraged to protect only their feet and noggins.



JUNE Year of the Rat

20 China's aggressive spying efforts have ensnared another American. Gregg Bergersen, a former Defense Department analyst, faces sentencing today. In March, he pleaded guilty to providing secret information about U.S.-Taiwanese military sales in exchange for gifts and money. Another American, an engineer, was sentenced in March for passing details of submarine technology to the Middle Kingdom.



JUNE Anglican Split

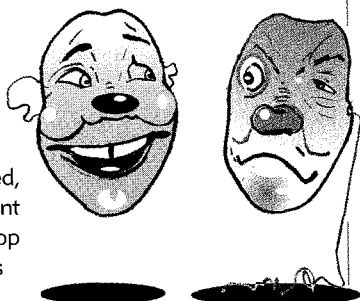
22 The schism in the Anglican Church over gay marriage and gay clergy could widen this week. Many conservative church leaders have announced that they'll skip an important decennial Anglican gathering next month called the Lambeth Conference, and instead hold their own summit, starting today in Jerusalem, to plot a future course for the conservative branch of the Church.

JUNE Collared

27 Prosecutors get a second bite at Michael Vick today, as the one-time Atlanta Falcons quarterback, already in federal prison for dogfighting, stands trial in Virginia on two state felony counts, each of which carries a possible five-year penalty. His federal sentence is scheduled to end next July.

JUNE Another Lousy Sequel

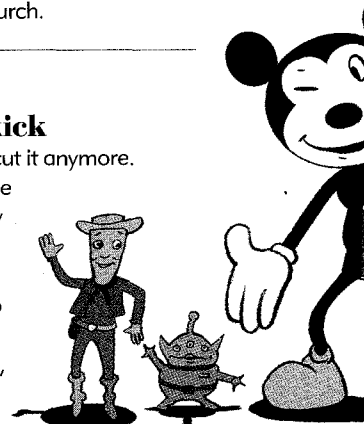
30 The writers are back—but now the actors may strike. With the Screen Actors Guild contract expiring today, Hollywood has been hustling to avoid another paralyzing work stoppage. (In the first month after the writers returned, 68 movies began production—a 62 percent increase over the same period last year.) Top stars like George Clooney and Tom Hanks have called for a quick settlement.



ALSO IN JUNE:

Mickey Gets a Sidekick

Spinning teacups just don't cut it anymore. Facing stiff competition in the theme-park business, Disney has launched a \$1.1 billion upgrade of its California Adventure Park, next door to the original Disneyland. The flagship ride, the \$80 million, 3-D "immersive" Toy Story Mania!, opens this month.



The iPhone Sells Out

Having conquered the hipsters, Apple makes a play for the boardroom this month when a long-anticipated software update allows the iPhone to sync with corporate e-mail, an area currently dominated by Microsoft and BlackBerry.

PRIMARY SOURCES

TERRORISM

The Rational Insurgent

Bush administration officials (and fellow travelers) aren't the only ones who believe that when Americans talk about withdrawing from Iraq, it "emboldens the enemy." Two Harvard researchers recently found that in periods following intensified criticism of the Iraq War by the American public and in the U.S. media, insurgent violence in Iraq increased by 5 to 10 percent. Using data on rates of insurgent attacks, Iraqi access to international news, frequency of antiwar statements in the American media, and U.S. public opinion polls—and controlling for other factors—the authors found that insurgents do not just randomly wreak havoc, but react strategically to developments in American politics. Specifically, when insurgents perceive a drop in American resolve, they unleash more destruction,



thereby increasing the cost of fighting for the U.S. military and, they hope, tipping the scales toward a withdrawal. The authors conclude that a "systematic response" in the form of "emboldenment" is evident among insurgents. Of course, the report doesn't suggest simply cutting off Iraqi access to CNN. Given that insurgents appear to act

rationally to achieve their goals, the authors instead suggest a shift in counterinsurgency strategy away from search-and-destroy, and toward deterrence and incapacitation.

—*"Is There an 'Emboldenment' Effect? Evidence From the Insurgency in Iraq," Radha Iyengar and Jonathan Monten, National Bureau of Economic Research*

ECONOMICS

What's in Your Wallet?

Economists have long argued that a rational person should walk around with a fat roll of cash—\$551.05, to be precise, based on factors like interest rates, ATM fees, and time wasted making withdrawals. But evidence (and common sense) shows that Americans carry far less: roughly \$100. In a new paper, a researcher at Bard College explains this apparent contradiction by calculating the hidden costs of theft. Classic models predict that the probability of getting robbed decreases only slightly the amount we should hold, to \$510.05 (using 1995 rates, for technical reasons). But in his new model, the author incorporates two important concepts—the "don't flash your cash" theory (in which the probability of getting mugged increases with the amount of cash held) and the indirect costs of robbery (such as injuries, psychological trauma, medical bills, and time off work)—and finds that carrying a lot of cash is riskier than once thought. As a result, he concludes that prudent



Americans should actually carry about \$76. The new model, though rough, helps measure the sum of our fears: Americans had \$96 billion less in their pockets, at the time the data were collected, than they would have had in a crime-free world. Although this provides some benefits (interest gained while the money sits in an account), it has more costs (the time it takes to go to the bank). All told, the author estimates, the fear of being robbed now saps us of \$14.6 billion a year.

—*"Can Robbery and Other Theft Help Explain the Textbook Currency-Demand Puzzle?," Greg Hannsgen, Levy Economics Institute of Bard College*

EDUCATION

Tutor Dynasty

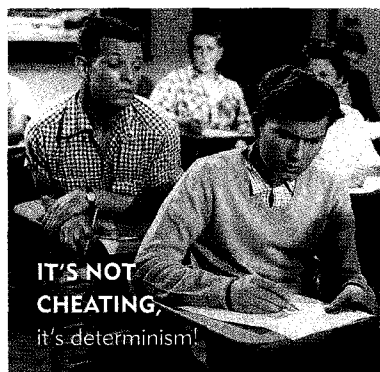
The private-tutoring industry is reshaping the education landscape of both rich and poor nations, yet policy makers largely haven't noticed, argues a new report from the World Bank. The authors survey evidence from 22 economically diverse countries, including the United States, and find that between 25 and 90 percent of students have worked with tutors at some point. In countries such as Turkey and Korea, spending on private tutoring nearly matches the percentage of GDP spent on the formal public education system. Although the authors conclude that strong tutoring programs do increase student achievement, they caution that without stricter government regulation, widespread tutoring could block much-needed improvements in the public system, increase inequality among students, lead to teacher corruption (particularly in developing countries), and eventually erode the "quality and efficiency of the public schools."

—*"How to Interpret the Growing Phenomenon of Private Tutoring: Human Capital Deepening, Inequality Increasing, or Waste of Resources?," Hai-Anh Dang and F. Halsey Rogers, World Bank Development Research Group*

TOP: AP PHOTO; LEFT: JOE RAEDIE/GETTY IMAGES

PSYCHOLOGY To Be, Determined?

What would happen if no one believed in free will, but instead assumed that all their actions were predetermined? For one thing, according to a recent study, we'd end up with a lot of greedy cheaters. A psychologist and a marketing professor asked two groups of undergraduates to read passages from a book by the biophysicist Francis Crick. Students in one group read a passage that argued against the possibility of free will, while students in the other group read a neutral passage on consciousness. The subjects then took a basic arithmetic test on a computer but were told that, because of a glitch in the program, the computer would automatically feed them the right answer to each question unless they pressed a key to stop it. The computer secretly recorded what they did. The researchers found that those students who had read Crick's argument



against individual agency were substantially more likely to cheat, and that they showed less faith in free will than their counterparts in a follow-up survey. The authors conclude that even if free will is an illusion, it is "an illusion that nevertheless offers some functionality" when it comes to encouraging moral behavior.

—"The Value of Believing in Free Will,"
Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler,
Psychological Science

MEDIA

Start the Presses

Could a say-nothing press be the cause of our do-nothing Congress? With fears growing that media consolidation is leading to less informed citizens and less responsible politicians, two economists measured how the quantity of local news coverage affects the quality of governance. They found that local newspapers—especially those with coverage areas that closely overlap congressional districts—are vital in keeping voters knowledgeable and congress members accountable to their constituents. Residents of districts with more press coverage of their delegations are better able to name their representatives, identify their political ideologies, and say whether they like them. Congress members in such districts are more likely to stand witness at hearings (by 46 percent), diverge from the party line to help constituents, and serve on important committees. They also steer 10 percent more federal cash back home.

—"Press Coverage and Political Accountability,"
James M. Snyder Jr. and David Strömberg,
National Bureau of Economic Research



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TECHNOLOGY Map Test

GPS navigators have spared men around the world from having to roll down their windows to ask for directions, but the devices may not be leading them to their destinations any faster. Four researchers compared the effectiveness of a cell phone equipped with a GPS receiver to traditional paper maps and to "direct experience" (first walking through a route with a guide, then trying it alone). They asked 66 participants each to walk six different routes, finding their way each time using one of the three navigational aids, and later to sketch from memory the routes they had taken. The GPS users traveled longer distances, walked

more slowly, and made more stops during the walk than the participants using the low-tech methods, and they made more directional errors and rated the overall experience as more difficult than did the direct-experience group. Perhaps because the GPS users were more focused on the information on their small screens than on their surroundings, the maps they drew showed a less accurate recollection of their routes. "For the GPS system to become a helpful 'navigator,'" the authors conclude, "there is still room for improvement."

—"Wayfinding With a GPS-Based Mobile Navigation System," Toru Ishikawa, Hiromichi Fujiwara, Osamu Imai, Atsuyuki Okabe, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*



FOREIGN AFFAIRS Skyscrapers of Wrath

The Chinese government has invested some \$40 billion to remake Beijing—with broad streets and colossal skyscrapers—in time for the 2008 Olympic Games. But according to a new report by Human Rights Watch, much of this construction boom has been achieved on the backs of severely mistreated migrant workers. Between 1 million and 2 million construction workers, about 90 percent of them migrants, now work in the city. The authors of the study conducted interviews with workers at nine different sites and found widespread abuse: migrants routinely were not paid until the end of the year, and in some instances were not paid at all. They received only small amounts of food, "often inedible," for

which they were charged out of their paychecks. Most of them lacked insurance, despite the high rate of injury and death at construction sites, and those who tried to unionize and strike were harassed by "hoodlums" hired by the construction companies. When the authors visited the workers' quarters, they found 20 men sharing 10 beds, without heat in the winter, and reported that on-site housing "is of poor quality, overcrowded and often lacks washing facilities." The report demands that the International Olympic Committee do more to protect migrants working on Olympic sites, and threatens to publicize the workers' conditions to spectators at the games if the IOC fails to act.

—"One Year of My Blood": Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in Beijing," Human Rights Watch



ENVIRONMENT Easy Being Green

Despite all kinds of government tinkering, market forces and idealism (or at least the chance to righteously upstage one's neighbors) seem to be the biggest motivations for buying hybrid cars. A new study by two public-policy scholars at Harvard finds that while federal and state tax breaks and other policy inducements encourage Americans to buy hybrids, the price of gasoline is a much bigger incentive—and "social preference" is the biggest of all. Carmakers sold more than 250,000 hybrids in 2006 alone, and governments have tried various novel policies to keep the assembly lines buzzing. States like California and New Jersey now give hybrid drivers the right to zip down high-occupancy-vehicle lanes, while cities like New Haven and San Jose have reduced or even waived public-parking fees for hybrids. But while sales-tax waivers seem to be the most effective government action, spurring an estimated 6 percent of hybrid sales, soaring gas prices provide an even more compelling inducement, associated with 27 percent of sales. And a buyer's preference for leaving a smaller carbon footprint or for supporting energy security—or just for driving "an observably 'green' vehicle"—proves to be the most effective tool, accounting for 36 percent of all hybrids leaving the dealer's lot.

—"Giving Green to Get Green: Incentives and Consumer Adoption of Hybrid Vehicle Technology," Kelly Sims Gallagher and Erich Muehlegger, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

For links to the documents discussed in this section, visit www.theatlantic.com/doc/200806/primarysources.



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THE WORLD IN NUMBERS

Can better highways save Afghanistan?

Asphalt Dreams

BY PHILIP SMUCKER

Afghanistan's high plateaus and steep mountains have served throughout history as obstacles to foreign intrusion. Alexander the Great's campaign through Afghanistan led to a temporary fusion of Western and Eastern art and culture but left no lasting roads in its wake. Centuries later, the Turco-Mongol conqueror Tamerlane complained in his memoirs of rough travel through the region, lamenting that he had to submit to being lowered down cliffs in a basket. When his horses were subjected to the same procedure, many flailed and were battered to death upon the rocks. His exit from the Hindu Kush mountain range was preceded by a prayer for his deliverance.

When the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan, in 2001, they found the conditions to be nearly as rough. A dearth of traversable roads hindered the attack on al-Qaeda forces at Tora Bora, and has complicated the country's governance. NATO allies squabble over many things, but on one they all agree: if Afghanistan is ever to be secure, prosperous, and cohesive, it must first be paved.

The country's main roadway, known as the Ring Road and intended to link Afghanistan's largest cities, was begun in the 1960s. But war in the 1970s prevented the 1,900-mile ring from being completed; bombings, flash floods, and harsh winters badly degraded what had been built. Since 2001, international development groups have devoted some \$2 billion to rebuilding and expanding the country's road network. The Asian Development Bank alone has allocated \$600 million for rebuilding the Ring Road.

Road building is by far Afghanistan's largest public-works program

today, and as such it is to some extent an end in itself. One U.S. military engineer, Army Commander Larry LeGree, boasts that—with his extensive budget—he can outspend the Taliban and al-Qaeda at every bend in the road. If, for example, al-Qaeda-backed insurgents are getting \$5 a day, he'll pay a road worker \$5.50. He says he is banking on the belief that many insurgents will—for the right price—opt out of the fight in favor of roadwork.

The completion of the Ring Road (scheduled for 2010), along with key bridges and border-crossing points, is expected to raise the nation's official trade from \$4.7 billion in 2005 to some \$12 billion in 2016. Already, the 300-mile ride south from Kabul to Kandahar on this route, which used to take 14 hours, can be completed in five, or fewer if you are in a hurry, which is invariably the case. Fresh asphalt hasn't kept the Taliban and assorted brigands from setting up mobile "gantlets" along the highway, where they sometimes extort, rob, kidnap, or behead passersby. Still, these security threats seem to be only a limited deterrent for Afghan truck drivers, who are renowned across South Asia for their stamina and courage.

Will better roads really make a big difference to Afghanistan's future? The Taliban certainly seem to think so: the group's forces have made a concerted effort to stop construction. Insurgents regularly target road crews in their camps and as they work. Indeed, LeGree's wage math leaves out an important variable: al-Qaeda not only pays insurgents a day rate, but also—according to U.S. platoon leaders—offers incentives for killing U.S. soldiers and Afghan road workers, dozens of whom have been slaughtered in

eastern Afghanistan alone. The need for fortified camps and armed guards makes the cost of road construction in Afghanistan 30 to 50 percent higher than elsewhere in South Asia.

The lion's share of U.S. road money is now directed toward smaller roads and bridges—many of them entirely new—in eastern Afghanistan, the very terrain that hindered Alexander and Tamerlane and that helped Osama bin Laden escape from Tora Bora. When completed, these roads—which snake into the remotest valleys and toward the hottest insurgent strongholds—will, in theory, serve as a "fire wall" against infiltration from Pakistan, by allowing more-comprehensive patrols and exposing the winding goat paths used by inbound insurgents and arms smugglers.

The cost of this latest endeavor is high, and progress slow. Sealing the unmarked and largely unguarded 1,400-mile border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with its endless valleys and passes, would appear to be a near-Sisyphean task. Yet at the same time, it is clear that Afghanistan's mountains, which for so long guaranteed the country's security and independence, are now helping to destabilize it—acting as a sieve for insurgents slipping in and out. It is perhaps ironic that one key to the country's viability—its border security—may turn out to involve the paving-over of the natural barriers that have always protected it. ▀

Philip Smucker, the author of *Al Qaeda's Great Escape: The Military and the Media on Terror's Trail* (2004), is writing a book about the battle of ideas in the Islamic world.

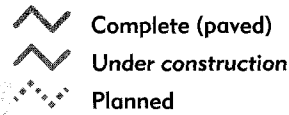
NATO/Coalition deaths, by province 2006–2008*



*By hostile action, through March 2008

Road construction

(As of February 2008)



Bombs Away

U.S. commanders in Kunar province say that the number of roadside bomb attacks has been cut by more than half over the past year, in part because of road improvements—mines are more difficult to conceal on asphalt roads than on dirt ones. Overall, confirmed deaths of NATO and coalition forces in Kunar have dropped, from about 30 in 2006 to 10 or so in 2007, and to just one during the first three months of this year.

The Ring

Afghanistan's main highway, the Ring Road, is almost complete. Only three major portions are still unfinished: a Japanese-financed stretch between Kandahar and Helmand provinces, where the British and Canadians do daily battle with the Taliban; a rough section in the northwest near Turkmenistan, which has also come under heavy attack in recent months; and a section close to Tajikistan. Workers regularly face roadside bombs, gunfights, and rocket attacks.

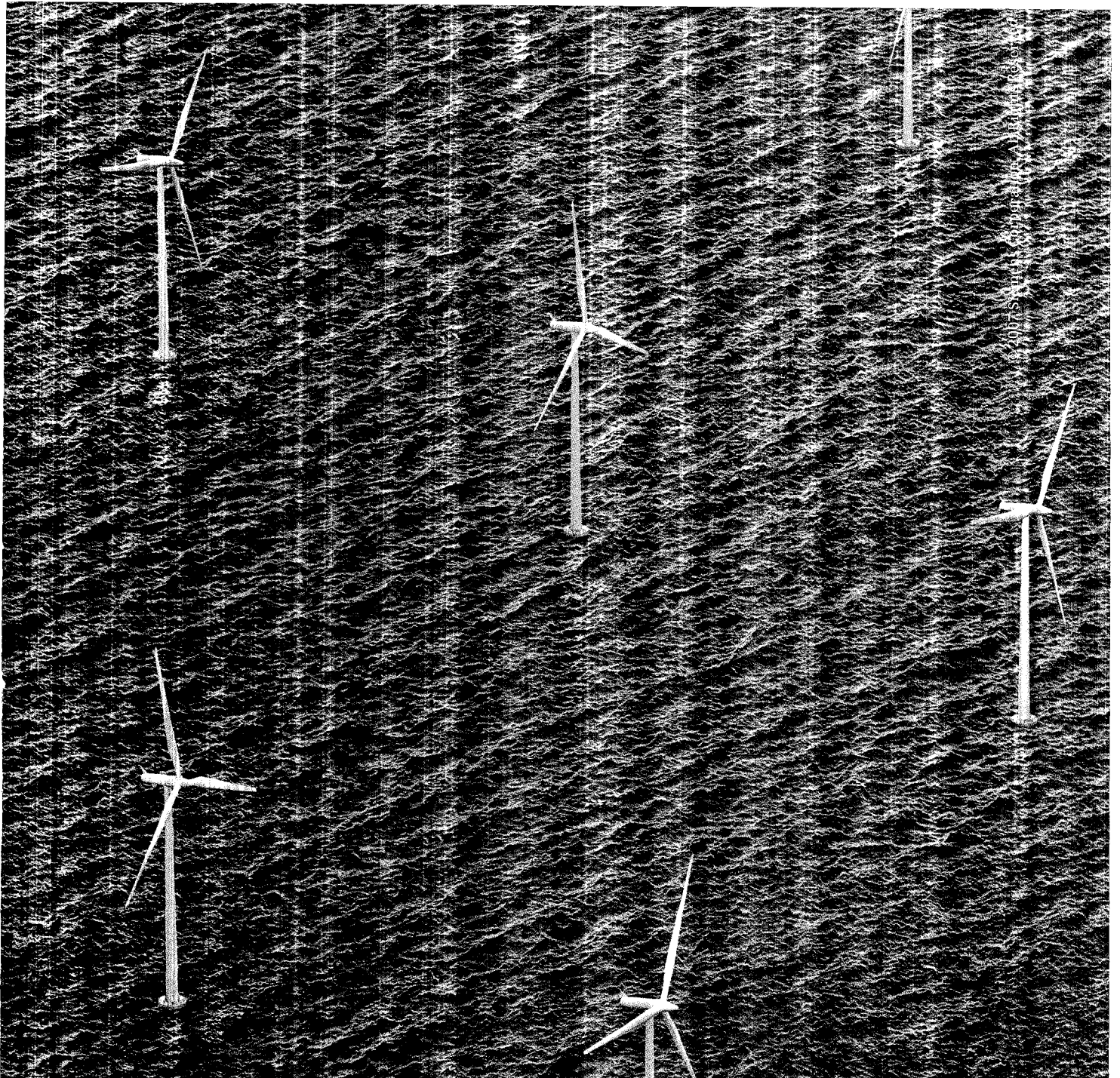
Hope Through Better Highways?

Heavy fighting continues in isolated valleys, particularly in the Korengal Valley, where road building is under way. But a road through the Pech Valley, now complete, has provided the kind of economic and security boost that U.S. officers say they anticipated. Senator Joseph Biden, who visited Kunar province in February, told the Associated Press, "How do you spell hope in Dari and Pashtu? A-S-P-H-A-L-T."

SOURCES: ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK; U.S. MILITARY. MAP BY RYAN MORRIS

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planet hungry for electricity
without damaging it?**





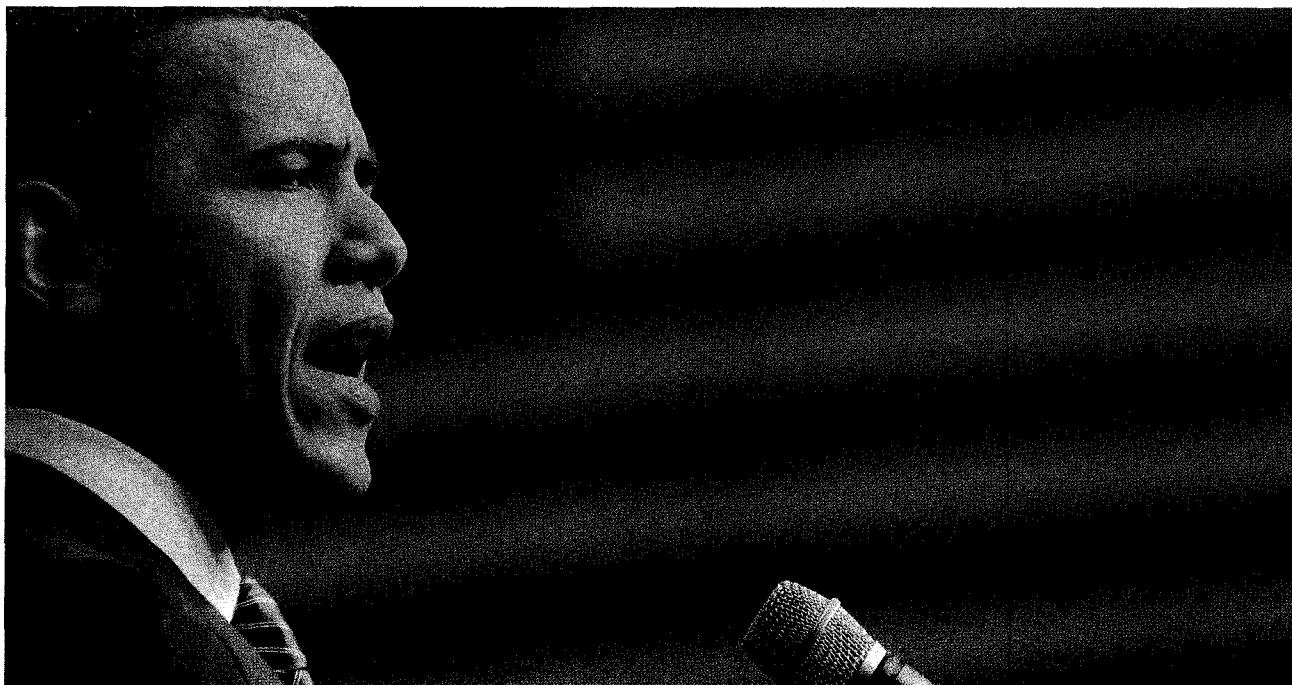
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REPORT

How an early gaffe and an excruciatingly long primary season helped Barack Obama find a distinctive voice on foreign affairs

The Accidental Foreign Policy

BY MATTHEW YGLESIAS

For many Democratic insiders, the seemingly endless primary season has become a sore subject; they believe the length of the contest will hurt the party's chances in November. We'll have to wait and see if that happens, but it's worth noting that as the campaign has gone on, it has produced more than just acrimony. It's produced a meaningful new approach to foreign policy as well—the first substantial alternative to George W. Bush's policies that has entered the political mainstream since 9/11, and one whose airing should be welcomed not just by Democrats but by all voters.

Barack Obama has always been an independent thinker. He of course opposed the war in Iraq, and he's built a team of national-security advisers who disproportionately took the same, then-unpopular antiwar view. But as a

presidential candidate articulating what he might do in office, his real break with convention may have begun with a gaffe.

For the better part of a generation, top Democratic politicians have followed, with astonishing uniformity, the same set of unwritten rules in their approach to foreign affairs: match GOP "toughness"; tack to the right on major foreign-policy principles; and, above all, avoid taking positions that could be criticized as weak. So at the YouTube debate on July 23, 2007, when Obama was asked whether he would be willing to meet "without precondition ... with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea," the right answer, conventionally speaking, was a qualified "no." But Obama answered in the affirmative. Initially, even sympathetic observers like *The Nation's* David Corn called

this statement a "flub" at best. Hillary Clinton, the quintessence of Democratic establishment thinking, had answered that she would use "high-level presidential envoys to test the waters, to feel the way," before holding direct meetings with heads of state.

Few observers believed that Obama genuinely intended to break new ground with his response—his campaign had never articulated any such policy before, and seemed ill-prepared to defend it on the spot. The Clinton campaign dutifully pressed the attack the next day, calling Obama's statement "irresponsible and frankly naive." But then a funny thing happened. Obama's team did not try to qualify (or, in political parlance, "clarify") his remark, and no one said he misspoke. Instead, the campaign fought back, with memos to reporters and with a speech by

MICHAEL CZERWONKA/EPA/CORBIS

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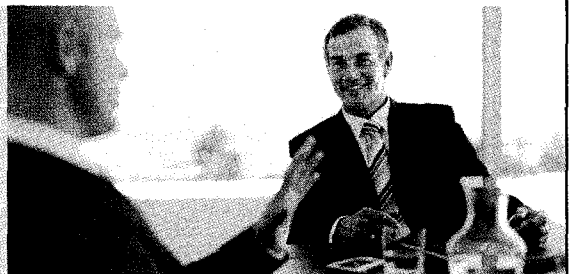
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the candidate himself, aimed squarely at the sort of "conventional wisdom" that had, in the words of his then-foreign-policy adviser, Samantha Power, "led us into the worst strategic blunder in the history of U.S. foreign policy."

It was only mid-summer, ages before the Iowa caucuses in campaign time, so it was a good moment to experiment. And it worked: polling suggested that Americans were largely on board with Obama's position. Soon, on the stump, he was regularly referring to his willingness to meet with foreign leaders, unlike other top presidential candidates.

This position really was a departure for Obama. Despite his stand against the war in 2002, he had since hewed closely to the party line on foreign affairs. The only substantive thing he had to say about Iraq policy during his famous 2004 convention speech was: "When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation

Tube skirmish might have remained a curiosity, a small outlier in an otherwise conventional foreign-policy agenda. A "bring home the troops" pitch would have created more than enough contrast with John McCain's foreign policy, and a strong focal point for debate. With the entire electorate as an audience, it would have been in Obama's interest to minimize their other foreign-policy differences.

But "bring home the troops" offered no differentiation from Hillary Clinton, who had more or less successfully pivoted away from her earlier support of the war. As the campaign stretched on and Clinton sharpened her attacks on Obama's commander-in-chief credentials, he began to counter by questioning her whole approach to foreign policy—the establishment approach. Today, Obama calls not only for direct negotiations with leaders of rogue states, but also for an American commitment to eventual global nuclear disarmament (in part to reinvigorate nonproliferation efforts);

place in the world. Nor does it involve any strained attempts to develop a theoretical worldview from which all conclusions must follow (if Obama wins in November, the thrilling debate over what should replace neoconservatism—"realistic Wilsonianism"? "ethical realism"?—can be tabled). Instead, the crux of his approach is a certain fearlessness in asking questions, a refusal to dismiss any option as simply taboo. Why not talk to the leaders of Iran and Syria? If we want other countries to follow the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, why shouldn't we be willing to live up to our own treaty commitments? If al-Qaeda is primarily in central Asia, how come America's military and intelligence resources aren't?

Through his willingness to ask those questions and follow the answers wherever they lead, Obama has discovered substantial wellsprings of support. Much of the professional counterterrorism community opposed the invasion of Iraq from the beginning, and Obama has obtained formal and informal support from many of that group's leading lights. Similarly, Obama's position on nuclear weapons follows not only liberal disarmament prescriptions but also the advice of Republicans in good standing, such as George Shultz and Henry Kissinger. Above all, his general approach is pragmatic. More to the point, it doesn't heed the usual political advice that says Democrats should recoil in fear from anything that could be painted as weakness.

Obama's campaign is betting on the idea that the disaster in Iraq has helped make what it calls "the politics of fear" obsolete, and that the time is ripe for something else. It's a plausible theory, but also a risky one—so risky that the campaign only adopted it when forced to. But regardless of whether it works in the end, it should be tested: 9/11, and Bush's response to it, have raised important questions about America's role in the world; the country deserves an election in which the nominees debate those questions squarely. ■

Matthew Yglesias is an Atlantic associate editor. His book, *Heads in the Sand: How the Republicans Screw Up Foreign Policy and Foreign Policy Screws Up the Democrats*, was published in April.

The crux of Obama's approach is a certain fearlessness in asking questions, a refusal to dismiss any option as simply taboo.

not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they are going; to care for their families while they're gone; to tend to the soldiers upon their return; and to never, ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world." This merely echoed the bland competence-and-execution argument of mainstream party thinking. And as Clinton's campaign has been at pains to point out, Obama's Senate voting record on Iraq-related issues is nearly identical to hers. Before the YouTube debate, the higher Obama's political ambitions had reached, the more cautious his foreign policy had become.

If Obama had followed up his win in Iowa with a victory in New Hampshire, as once looked likely, and then wrapped up the nomination in February, the You-

a substantial rebalancing of American military priorities toward Afghanistan (and away from Iraq); a softening of the embargo on Cuba; and a widening of the current, single-minded focus on democracy promotion to include other development goals that might more effectively prevent terrorist recruitment. Many think that there's little difference between the Democrats on policy grounds. That may once have been true, but over time—and largely in response to Clinton's barbs—Obama's foreign-policy approach has evolved into something substantially different from either Clinton's or McCain's.

Mercifully, Obama's foreign-policy approach is not characterized by "new ideas"—there are no genuinely new ideas about how to manage America's

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AARPSM

REPORT

Climate-change litigation is heating up. Will the legal strategy that brought down Big Tobacco work against Big Oil?

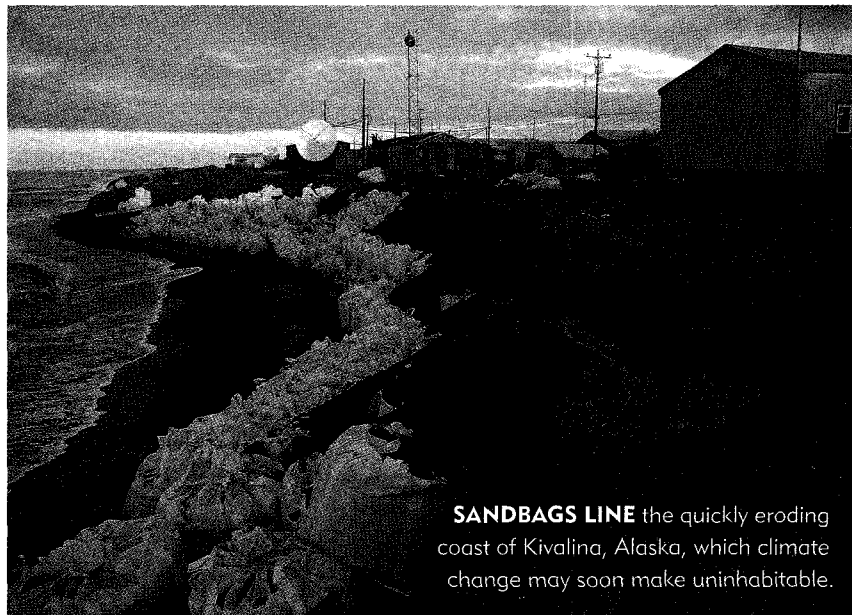
Conspiracy Theory

BY STEPHAN FARIS

During the tobacco wars of the 1990s, attorneys Steve Susman and Steve Berman stood on opposite sides of the courtroom. Berman represented 13 states in what was then seen as a quixotic attempt to recover smoking-related medical costs, and conceived the strategy that would break the tobacco industry's back: an emphasis on charges of conspiracy to deceive the public about the dangers of cigarettes. Susman had turned down offers to represent Massachusetts and Texas against the cigarette makers; instead he defended Philip Morris—until 1998, when the industry settled for more than \$200 billion, the biggest civil settlement ever. Now, a decade later, the two lawyers find themselves on the same side of the aisle, working on a case that seems just as improbable as the ones that brought down Big Tobacco ever did—and with implications that could be at least as far-reaching.

The Eskimo village of Kivalina sits on the tip of an eight-mile barrier reef on the west coast of Alaska. Fierce storms are ripping apart the shores. Residents report sinkholes in nearby riverbanks. Despite emergency erosion-control efforts, the crumbling coast threatens the village's school and electric plant. In 2006, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concluded that Kivalina would be uninhabitable in as little as 10 years, and that relocating its approximately 400 residents would cost at least \$95 million. Global climate change, the Corps report said, had shortened the season during which the sea was frozen, leaving the community more vulnerable to winter storms.

As scientific evidence accumulates on the destructive impact of carbon-dioxide emissions, a handful of lawyers



SANDBAGS LINE the quickly eroding coast of Kivalina, Alaska, which climate change may soon make uninhabitable.

are beginning to bring suits against the major contributors to climate change. Their arguments, so far, have not been well received; the courts have been understandably reluctant to hold a specific group of defendants responsible for a problem for which everyone on Earth bears some responsibility. Lawsuits in California, Mississippi, and New York have been dismissed by judges who say a ruling would require them to balance the perils of greenhouse gases against the benefits of fossil fuels—something best handled by legislatures.

But Susman and Berman have been intrigued by the possibilities. Both have added various environmental and energy cases to their portfolios over the years, and Susman recently taught a class on climate-change litigation at the University of Houston Law Center. Over time, the two trial lawyers have become convinced that they have the playbook necessary

to win big cases against the country's largest emitters. It's the same game plan that brought down Big Tobacco. And in Kivalina—where the link between global warming and material damage is strong—they believe they've found the perfect challenger.

In February, Berman and Susman—along with two attorneys who have previously worked on behalf of the village and an environmental lawyer specializing in global warming—filed suit in federal court against 24 oil, coal, and electric companies, claiming that their emissions are partially responsible for the coastal destruction in Kivalina. More important, the suit also accuses eight of the firms (American Electric Power, BP America, Chevron, Conoco-Phillips, Duke Energy, ExxonMobil, Peabody Energy, and Southern Company) of conspiring to cover up the threat of man-made climate change, in much

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the same way the tobacco industry tried to conceal the risks of smoking—by using a series of think tanks and other organizations to falsely sow public doubt in an emerging scientific consensus.

This second charge arguably eliminates the need for a judge to determine how much greenhouse-gas production—from refining fossil fuel and burning it to produce energy—is acceptable. “You’re not asking the court to evaluate the reasonableness of the conduct,” Berman says. “You’re asking a court to evaluate if somebody conspired to lie.” Monetary damages to Kivalina need not be sourced exclusively to the defendants’ emissions; they would derive from bad-faith efforts to prevent the enactment of public measures that might have slowed the warming.

The research and public-awareness efforts funded by Big Oil involve some of the same scientists and other professionals who once worked on behalf of Big Tobacco. For instance, Frederick Seitz, a former president of the National Academy of Sciences, who died in March, served as a research adviser for R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company and then founded the George C. Marshall Institute, an ExxonMobil-funded think tank that has challenged the connection between greenhouse gases and global warming. (The academy dissociated itself from Seitz’s conclusions in 1998.)

The energy industry’s ties to government, like the tobacco industry’s, have been unusually tight, and its lobbying efforts demonstrably effective. Philip Cooney, a liaison between the

that these companies lied in the course of their business, and were aware that the consequences could be dangerous. “You don’t want to interfere too much with efforts by people to lobby,” says Eric Posner, a professor at the University of Chicago Law School. “On the other hand, if they’re deliberately engaging in deception, there’s a stronger argument.”

Climate-change litigation is so new that legal experts have little idea how to handicap it; in unexplored areas of tort law, cases become pivotal only in hindsight. Some legal scholars are skeptical of the merits of the Kivalina case, but many others are looking on with interest. The cultural and political winds are certainly blowing in a favorable direction—and these winds often affect courts and juries. That factor, along with the very deep pockets of Big Oil, is likely to keep the lawsuits coming, testing different theories and different arguments. “It’s sort of like when infantry used to charge the machine guns,” says Joseph Wayne Smith, an Australian lawyer and the author of *Climate Change Litigation*. “A lot of them would get mowed down, but eventually a wave would get through and take out the pillbox.”

The first tobacco suits were filed in the 1950s, but it wasn’t until 1988 that lawyers were able to find chinks in the industry’s armor. The first lawsuit to succeed was also the first to accuse the industry of conspiracy. It’s anyone’s guess whether climate-change litigation, when mapped to that time line, is closer to the 1950s or to 1988. Indeed, it’s not clear whether warming-related monetary damages will ever be won from energy companies—much less whether they should be. But if the charges do stick in the Kivalina case, the defendants can expect many more in short order, as island nations, ski resorts, drought-stricken communities, and hurricane victims line up for their share. Regulation and litigation are two sides of the same coin. By working aggressively to prevent one, the energy companies may have left themselves open to the other. ▀

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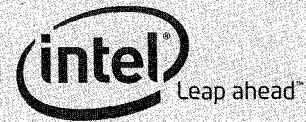
Berman and Susman aren’t alone in drawing parallels between the actions of the defendants and those of the tobacco industry. The Union of Concerned Scientists, an environmental advocacy group, has accused ExxonMobil of adopting the cigarette manufacturers’ strategy of covertly establishing “front” groups, promoting writers who exaggerate uncertainties in the science, and improperly cultivating ties within the government. The oil company, it says, has “funneled approximately \$16 million to carefully chosen organizations that promote disinformation on global warming.”

“The strategy to foster doubt is very effective,” says Naomi Oreskes, a professor of history and science studies at the University of California at San Diego. Oreskes is writing a book on the similar methods that the tobacco and fossil-fuel industries have used to challenge unwelcome scientific evidence. “If ‘nobody knows,’” she says, “then nobody is to blame. If ‘nobody knows,’ then how can we do anything about it?”

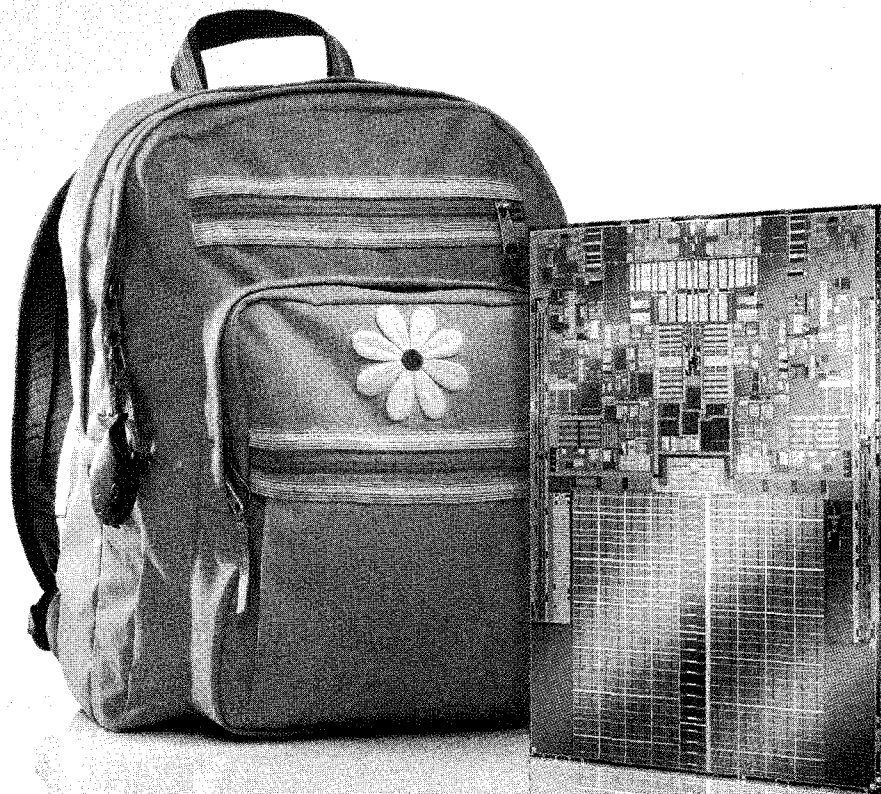
Bush administration and federal environmental agencies, edited uncertainty into reports on global warming by top government scientists from 2001 until 2005, when he resigned after examples of his changes were published by *The New York Times*. Before joining the White House, Cooney had worked for the American Petroleum Institute; a week after his departure, ExxonMobil announced he was joining the company. “In a sense, ExxonMobil walked right into the room of the science program,” says Rick Piltz, the federal official who blew the whistle on Cooney. A government memo obtained by Greenpeace outlines a State Department official’s talking points for a meeting with energy-company lobbyists: the president, the memo says, “rejected Kyoto, in part, based on input from you.”

Proving that energy companies tried to slow government action on global warming won’t be hard. The challenge in the Kivalina case, as it was in the breakthrough tobacco cases, will be to prove

Stephan Faris’s book on the political, economic, and strategic implications of climate change, *Forecast*, will be published in January.



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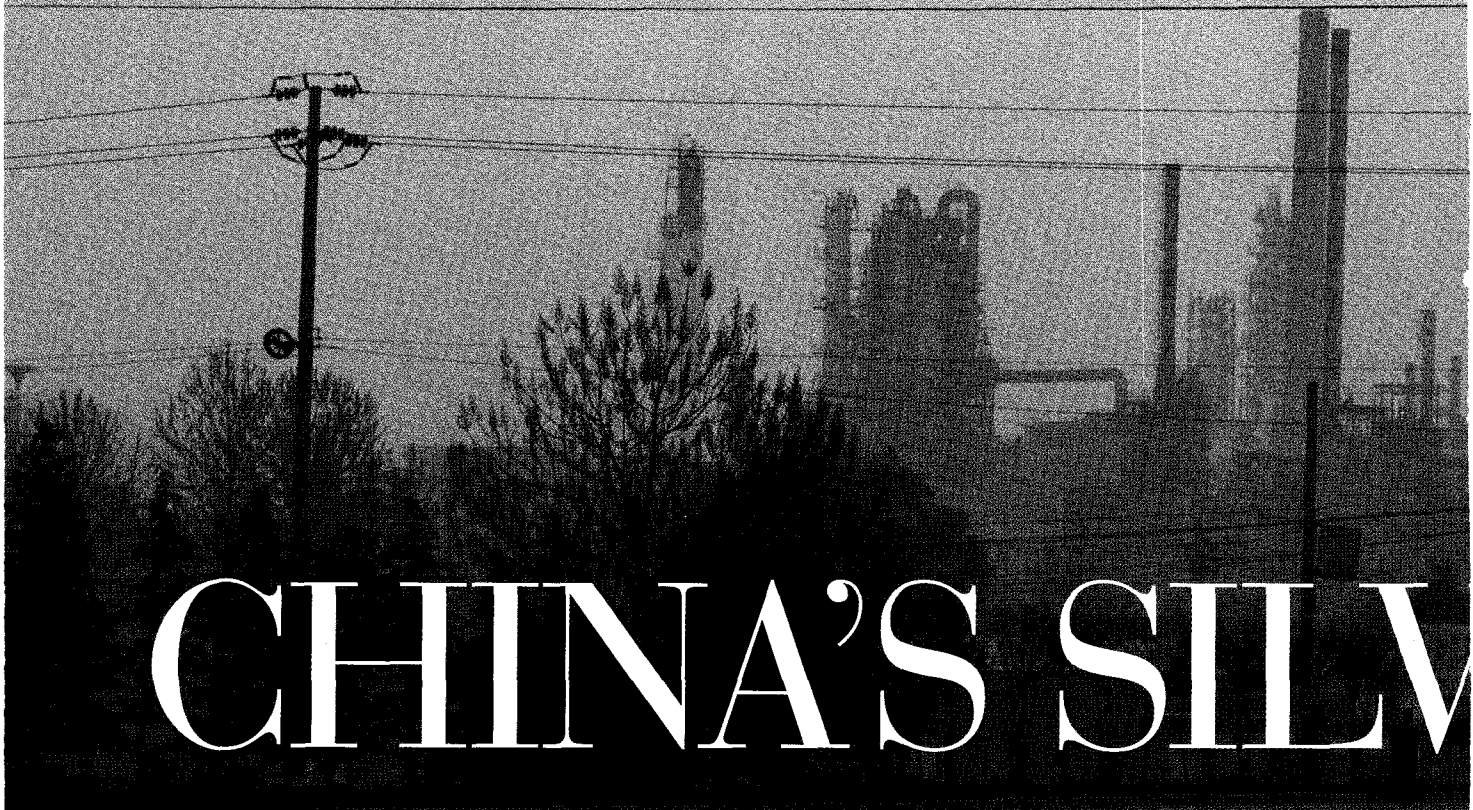
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Why smoggy skies over Beijing represent the
world's greatest environmental opportunity

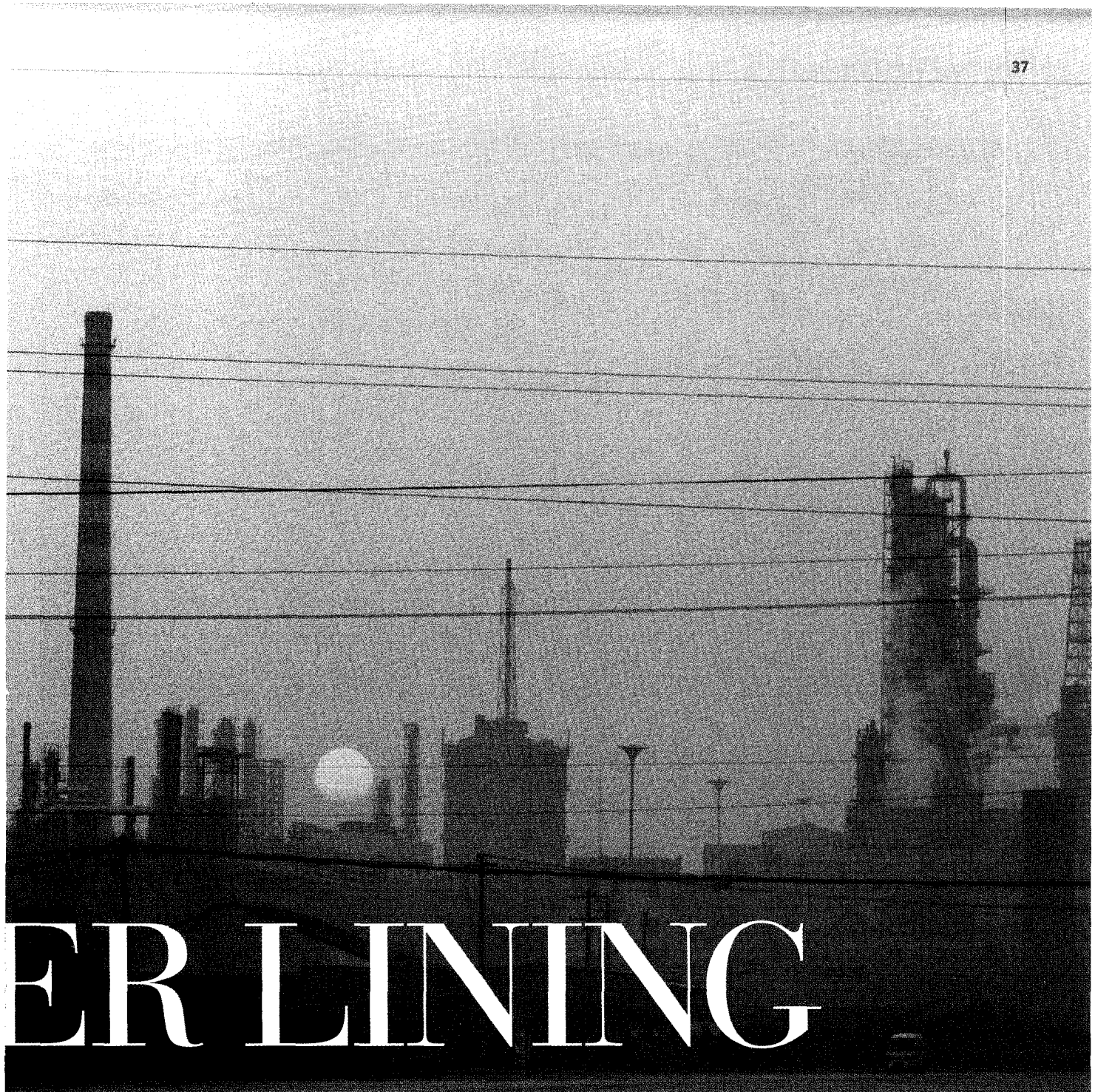
BY JAMES FALLOWS

Photographs by Ariana Lindquist



CHINA'S SILV

Chinese cement plants and coal mines are grim enough taken separately. Often they come as a package, the plant built next to the mine to minimize transport costs for the vast quantities of coal the cement-making process consumes. Converting limestone and other materials to the intermediate form of cement called “clinker” requires heating them to more than 2,600°F. Getting kilns this hot requires burning about 400 pounds of coal for each ton of cement produced.



ER LINING

The clinker then cools before it goes through further processing—but the waste heat and exhaust gas are sent straight into the sky, at temperatures of 650°F or more, along with the extra carbon dioxide the limestone emits as it becomes cement.

In coal-and-cement towns in China, people and buildings are colored black by the coal dust swirling around them, and coated gray and white by the cement dust that leaks from the kilns and clinker coolers and pours from the exhaust stacks. Driving through the foothills of the Tibetan plateau in western Sichuan province last year, my wife and I could tell from miles away when we were nearing a cement plant, from the grayish pall in the air and

the thickening layers of dust on the trees and road. With so much of the country under construction so fast, and with China's equivalent of America's interstate highway system being built in the space of a few years, modern China can appear to be made out of concrete. Nearly half of the world's cement is produced and used in China, and cement factories are a major source of both the country's surging demand for energy and the environmental damage that is the most shocking side effect of China's economic miracle.

Thus it was a surprise to drive toward a coal-cement complex in Zibo, a modest city of 4 or 5 million people in Shandong province, 230 miles southeast of Beijing, and



CEMENT VISIONARY: The engineer Tang Jinquan has harnessed the heat previously wasted in cement making.

see ... no white haze. True, miners trudging along the street had blackened faces, and the city was dotted with 100-foot-high mounds of low-grade coal, previously trash but now worth picking over because of soaring world demand. But no white powder mixed with the black, and only wispy plumes of steam wafted from the fat, high smokestacks of the Sunnsy cement company (its name is from the Chinese *shansui*, or “mountain water”). Indeed, the fattest and somewhat rusty-looking central exhaust stack had been fitted with elaborate ductwork of obviously newer metal, which captured everything coming out of the stack and shunted it to a nearby new building.

Inside the new building was an electricity-generating plant, and what I was seeing was the handiwork of a Chinese engineer in his mid-40s named Tang Jinquan. Tang had never intended to get into the cement business. But when he graduated from the technical university in Harbin, in far northern China, the government was still assigning jobs to graduates—and his assignment was a cement-research institute in his hometown of Tianjin. “I am interested in heat generation, this place is about cement—no match!” he told me (through an interpreter) at the factory in Zibo. He spent nearly the next 20 years of his career in a long effort to make the dirty, wasteful, fast-growing cement industry less environmentally destructive.

The heart of his idea—easy to describe, tricky to implement—is capturing the enormous amount of heat normally wasted in cement making and using it to run turbines that generate electric power. This power can

then be fed back into the factory, doing work that would otherwise require burning even more coal. The reduction of dust is a visible indicator of the more fundamental reduction of waste. Over the course of a long day, I heard about the many, many refinements Tang had made to this “co-generation” system since he first started working on it, in the mid-1980s. The punch line is that it now works well enough to cut the energy (mainly from coal) required to make clinker by 60 percent, and the overall power demands of the cement production line by 30 percent.

Four years ago, Tang left the cement-research institute to form, with two colleagues, a technology start-up company called Dalian East Energy Development, which sells co-generation systems to cement producers like Sunnsy. (It’s a long way from the days of government-assigned jobs.) The energy-recycling system at the factory I saw is expected to cover its multimillion-dollar cost (the exact sum is confidential) within four years, through reduced coal demand and government rebates for energy-saving investments. Sunnsy is a private firm, with annual sales of more than \$1 billion and a recent \$50 million investment from Morgan Stanley. According to Tang, the 120 similar installations at cement factories throughout China save 1.7 million tons of coal per year.

When I met Tang, he had just returned from a trip to Vietnam, where two of his systems are operating, and was about to head to Uzbekistan, where he has another (others are in India, the Philippines, and Pakistan). His dream now is to apply his co-generation technology to more of

China's most wasteful industries, starting with steel. "I have a long vision, which may not be realized before I die," he told me when we had lunch. "Of course, that might not be so long!" he added, laughing and waving a cigarette at me—one of 60 he smokes per day.

Tang added that when he goes to class reunions from his university and sees that he is the only one in the cement business, "I feel unacceptable, because the industry is not good." But he says he knows otherwise, and that he tells recruits to his firm to hold their heads high. "They should be proud of what we are doing! Other industries are consuming the Earth. We are preserving it."

Here is what I learned by visiting the cement factory, and by seeing and asking about many similar "green" projects in China: China's environmental situation is disastrous. And it is improving. Everyone knows about the first part. The second part is important too. Outside recognition of where and why China has made progress increases the prospects that it will make further advances. Recognition also clarifies the most important obstacles, political and economic, to such progress. And it is simply fair to the many people within China, including within the Chinese Communist Party,

No. 1 polluter in the world. (The mock festivities include the "100 Widow Smog Dance" and a spokesman declaring, "The labor of the people has made the sky black with the smoke of progress. We are overjoyed!")

The "environmental situation is still grave in China though with some positive development," the real Chinese government said in the English translation it issued. It went on to catalogue a familiar set of problems: "The emissions of major pollutants far exceed environmental capacity with serious environmental pollution ... The quality of coastal marine environment is at risk ... The number of days with haze in some big and medium sized cities has some increase, and acid rain pollution is not alleviated ... The phenomena of no strict observation of laws, little punishment to lawbreakers, poor law enforcement and supervision are still very common." And on through a very long list, with this stark conclusion: "China is facing [a] grim situation in addressing climate change ... Environmental problems at different stages of [the] industrialization process of developed countries over the past several hundred years [are now] concentrate[d] in China."

The alarming trends mentioned in this report correspond with what the outside world has heard, read, and assumed about the environmental disaster of modern

China's environmental situation is disastrous. And it is improving. Everyone knows about the first part. The second part is important too.

who are trying their best to make a difference—and who are having more success than most Westerners who rely on media accounts would suspect.

It is right, of course, that Western publications emphasize so often and so clearly the damage that China's economic rise has inflicted on its own environment and the world's. But the despairing tone of this coverage is itself becoming an issue within China—one more illustration in the long national narrative of not being fully appreciated or respected by the world's established powers. It might also be having an effect on what the government does.

Surprisingly enough, even official sources within China have gone far to recognize the challenges the country faces and its responsibility to deal with them. Last November, the Chinese government released its 11th Five-Year Plan for Environmental Protection. The tone of this document would come as a shock to anyone familiar with the relentlessly upbeat nature of official Chinese pronouncements—or with the famous mock-news video released by *The Onion* this spring, in which Chinese authorities burst with pride as they announce their nation's new status as the

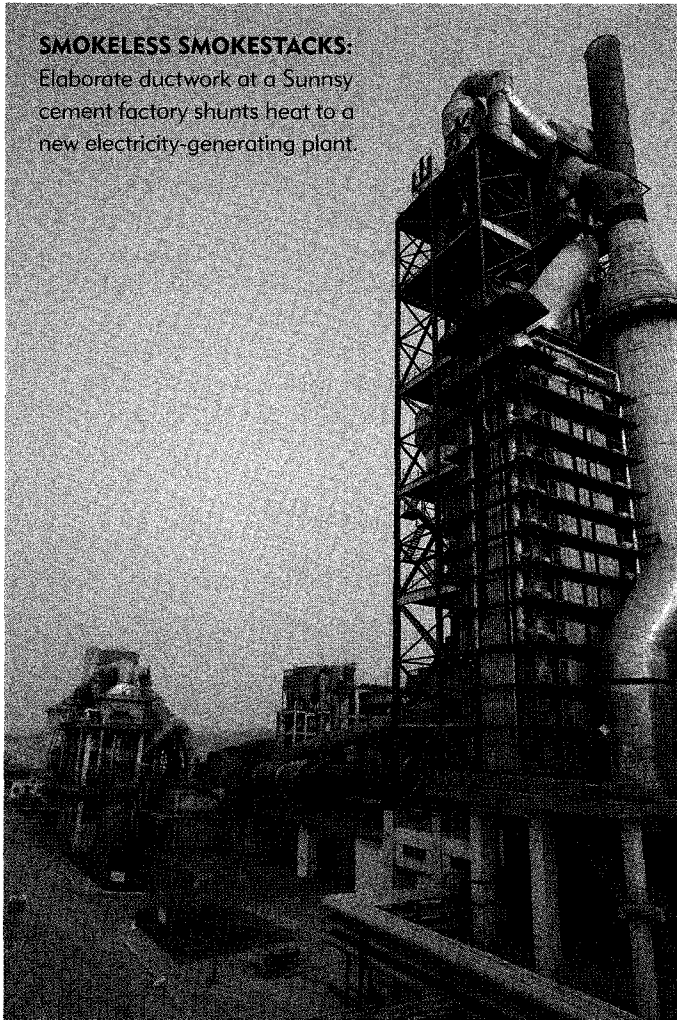
China. A new book or white paper on the topic seems to appear every day. The surprise is seeing them acknowledged in a paper issued not by an international research group but by the Chinese government itself, which has long been accused of refusing to see what is plain to everyone else. The problems, after all, are visible to any tourist from the moment of arrival. Everyone has heard or read about China's big-city air pollution, yet visitors are still shocked the first time they encounter a bad day in Beijing—or Chongqing or Xian or Shenyang or any of the other large cities with chronically grimy skies.

And the problems that are less obvious at a glance are even more threatening. Toxic emissions into lakes, groundwater, and farmland; the drying-up of rivers and silting-up of dams; the rapid exhaustion of water in the northern half of the country that, in the view of many experts, is likely to be China's next great environmental emergency; the millions of new cars that hit the road each year, spewing carbon dioxide; the billions of tons of coal that go up in smoke (yes, billions—China burns more than 2 billion tons of coal each year, about one-third of

the world's total); the engines on Chinese airliners that must be overhauled or replaced more frequently than elsewhere, an airline engineer told me, because operating in Chinese air corrodes the turbine blades ... living here, I don't have the heart to keep ticking items off. The title of one authoritative book on the subject, *The River Runs Black*, by Elizabeth Economy, of the Council on Foreign Relations, conveys the general idea, as does that of her follow-up *Foreign Affairs* article about China's environment, "The Great Leap Backward?"

SMOKELESS SMOKESTACKS:

Elaborate ductwork at a Sunnsy cement factory shunts heat to a new electricity-generating plant.



Through nearly two years in China, including this past winter and spring in Beijing, my wife and I have found the bad air and other forms of pollution to be the only serious challenge—physical, practical, or emotional—we face. We are here temporarily and voluntarily, and we're living like royalty compared with most local Chinese. Still, we continually face a basic choice. Either we decide we can't stand the conditions, in which case we should leave—an option for most foreigners but few Chinese. Or we decide that the openness, possibility, and importance of today's China justify these and other discomforts, in which case

we should stop complaining, try to ignore what we don't like, and be grateful for the historic opportunity we have. We keep deciding to stay. The point is, even privileged outsiders here must live with conditions they can't change, and those conditions are only a tiny window on the endurance required of the Chinese public.

But remember that other phrase from the government's 11th Five-Year Plan: there was "some positive development" amid the catastrophe. After travels around the country to look at factories, farms, and conservation projects, and talks with several dozen scientists, think-tank experts, officials, and business people from China and overseas, I came to think that the modestly positive developments merit more of the world's attention than they've received.

There will be no shortage of attention for the next big test of China's environmental positive developments: the Beijing Olympic Games. A year before they were to begin, the economist Matthew Kahn ranked 72 major world cities on overall environmental "livability." Beijing came in dead last, below Bangkok and Mumbai. In 2001, as part of its agreement to host the Olympics, the Chinese government promised to bring the air quality up to the standards of previous Olympic venues—in addition to making other commitments about reducing press controls and increasing civil liberties for its people. Whatever the government might or might not do toward keeping the political commitments, most people assumed that it would take any steps necessary to make the air acceptable by the opening ceremony, on August 8.

On a trip to Beijing in August 2006, I wondered when the authorities would ever get around to applying the clean-air plan. With each passing month, the woeful quality of Beijing's air and the implausible nature of official statements increased my skepticism that a normal Olympics could occur. At a press conference broadcast live from Beijing soon after I moved here from Shanghai, last October, Jacques Rogge, the head of the International Olympic Committee, said that some events might have to be rescheduled unless things improved fast. My TV screen went black at that point, and his remarks were not covered in the local press. When the world-record holder in the marathon, Haile Gebrselassie, of Ethiopia, said he wouldn't compete in that event for fear of hurting his lungs, the Chinese media pointed out that he hadn't yet been named to the team anyway. The Beijing city government was mocked in the foreign (though not the local) media for reporting an ever-improving count of "blue sky days" per month, which had to refer to something other than the actual color of the sky. I myself have been incredulous at the skies I see regularly outside the windows of the apartment my wife and I have been renting here. As a personal chronicle, I take a picture of the sky each day I'm in town, so I can record when, if ever, things really

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improve in preparation for the Games. (Current plans are to impose sweeping factory shutdowns and other emergency clean-up measures starting about three weeks before the Olympics begin.)

But, as at the cement plant, after I spent a day with the group of more than 20 scientists in charge of measuring the real quality of the city's air, I found myself less ready to scoff. These were physicists, atmospheric scientists, and other researchers from various institutes of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, or CAS. I met them at the Academy's Institute of Remote Sensing Applications, which is next door to the main Olympic site on the north side of Beijing.

The sky was a brilliant blue that day, thanks to the frigid wind roaring in from Mongolia. When the wind comes into Beijing from the west, as it did that day, it pushes the city's haze out toward the sea. But usually it comes from the south and southeast and brings smoke and dust from the hyperpolluted coal and steel regions of Shanxi and Shandong provinces, including the chokingly polluted coal city of Taiyuan, 250 miles southwest of Beijing. The smoke and dust from the south combine with Beijing's own automotive

I couldn't judge the machinery, but everything about the people and process seemed serious and scientific rather than political. Therefore I was willing to listen when Liu Wenqing, the director of the Anhui Institute of Optics and Fine Mechanics, and Wang Yuesi, of the Institute of Atmospheric Physics, said that, according to the team's readings, the air in Beijing was actually improving. Between 2000 and 2006, the city's population went up by half, to 15 million, and in about the same time the number of vehicles on its roads doubled, to 3 million (apparently the scare stories about a thousand extra cars per day joining Beijing's traffic are true). But because of tougher auto-emissions standards that took effect in 2006—similar to America's CAFE rules, but more stringent—and the forced closing of many factories in and around the city, the levels of all major pollutants fell during the same period. (The pollutants included nitrous oxide, ozone, and VOCs, or volatile organic compounds, like benzene.) These were long-term changes, not whatever emergency shutdown measures the government will take just before the Games begin.

England, the U.S., and others got rich before starting to clean up from the environmental-disaster stage of industrialization. China can't afford to wait that long.

and factory fumes and hang over the city, trapped by mountains on the western edge. That's when the air is so dense and dark that spectators on one side of the Olympic Stadium would barely be able to see to the other.

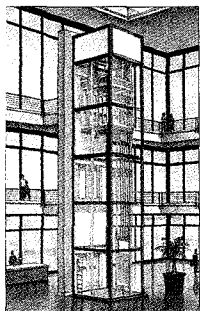
I visited the scientists at a complex of about 15 research centers, plus an apartment block with housing for hundreds of CAS employees. The complex is just next to the Olympic grounds, in an area where new public buildings of all sorts are going up. In a series of briefings and outdoor tours, the scientists laid out the steps they had taken to get honest measures of Beijing's air problems. They built 1,000-foot-high towers in and around the city to measure pollutants at different altitudes and predict how the wind would spread them. They shot laser beams at reflectors on distant buildings and assessed the return signal to measure what was in the air. They mounted sensors on cars and vans and drove them around the city's ring roads to see where the pollution was worst. They converted the entire roof of their office building into an open-air lab overlooking the Olympic village. American-made spectrometers measured particulates and pollutants like ozone and nitrous oxide. A satellite dish received a steady stream of data from U.S. geophysical satellites, which was then matched with their local findings. And that was just a start.

The last PowerPoint slide in a presentation that one of the scientists showed me read, "We are confident that the air quality goals for Olympics 2008 will be met in Beijing." When I asked, "Really?" all eyes turned toward the senior CAS official in the room, a British-trained scientist. "I personally am sure the goals will be met," he said. Even if the winds are wrong? "Ninety-nine percent."

I don't know whether he is right, but what I took from the day was that sophisticated people are honestly trying to do the right thing, in ways official propaganda had not prepared me for. Like England, the United States, Japan, and others before it, China is passing through the environmental-disaster stage of industrialization and beginning to clean up. The difference is that those countries waited until they were rich before they started the process. China is still full of poor people, but for reasons of scale and impact, it cannot postpone cleaning up.

There are signs that Chinese officials at many levels are facing that fact. A recent episode that seemed to underscore China's stubbornness actually shows the reverse.

In 2004, the "Hu-Wen team" of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao had recently come into power with the slogan of building a "harmonious society." This specifically included greater harmony with nature. A man



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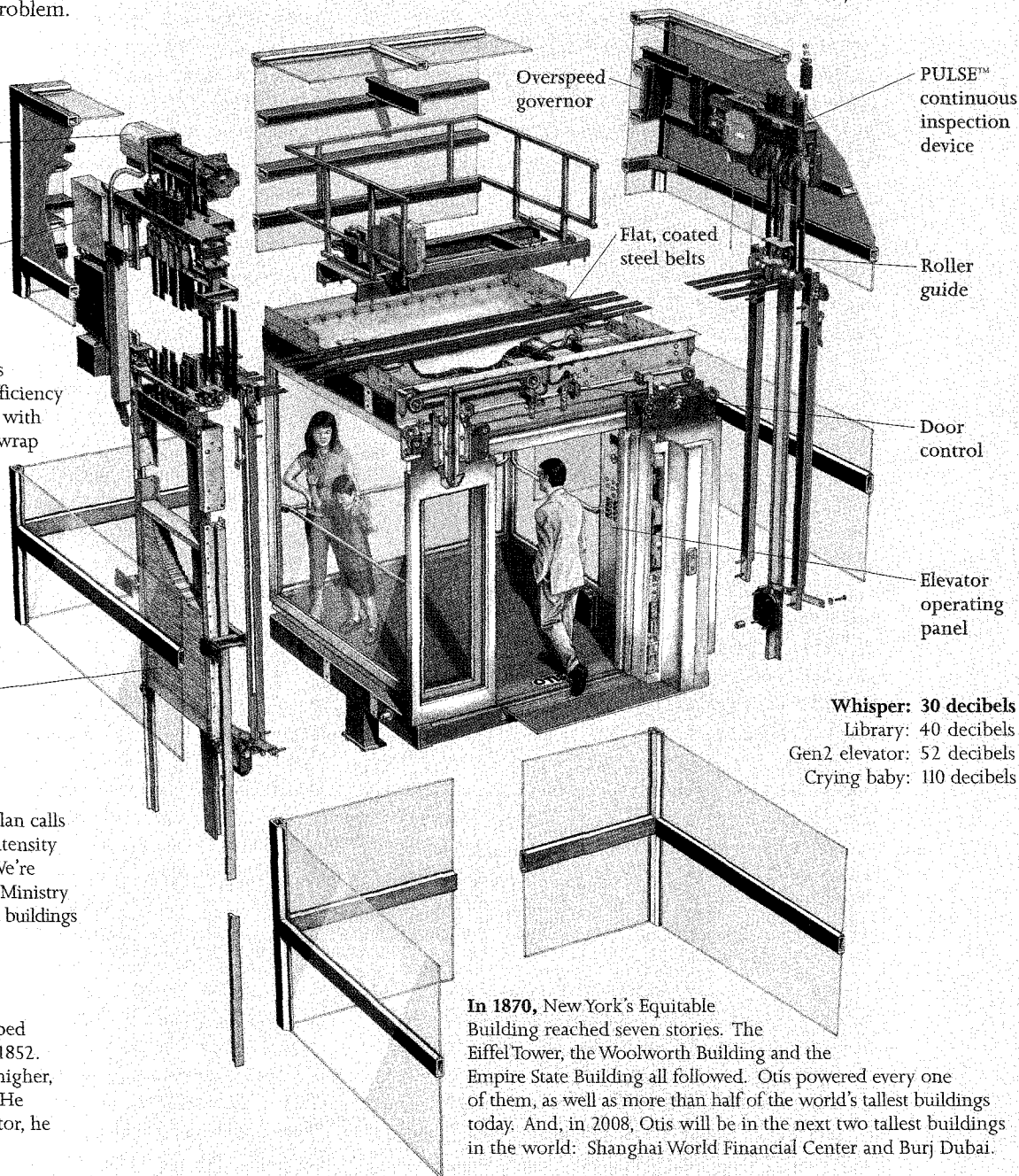
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named Pan Yue, the deputy director of China's State Environmental Protection Administration, had been giving speeches about the need to measure the environmental cost of economic growth. (Pan, a former soldier and journalist now in his late 40s—relatively young for an influential bureaucrat—has become the best-known spokesman for environmentalist causes in the government.) The agency, which this year became the Ministry of Environmental Protection, approached the World Bank for help in conducting the first comprehensive survey of the total cost to the country, economic and otherwise, of China's air and water pollution.

"At first we were reluctant," a bank official who declined to be named told me. "These measures are always controversial and difficult"—especially any attempt to measure a toll in human lives. But there were signs that progressive elements inside the Chinese government wanted the study for use "as inside argument for devoting more effort to the environmental issue." The important background point is that even though the outside world tends to see China itself and "the Chinese regime" as a great homogeneous bloc, there are ideological, regional, and personal rivalries at every level.

The economic calculations were sobering enough, to say nothing of the health consequences. When the World Bank issued its draft report, "Cost of Pollution in China," last summer, it said that China's economic growth rate would be cut significantly—perhaps by half or more—if the government accounted realistically for what Pan Yue called the country's "overdrafts" on resources. China's announced growth rate has been 9 to 10 percent each year over the past two decades; the report said that environmental costs could represent between 2.9 and 5.8 percent, which would reduce China's miraculous-seeming growth rate to sclerotic European levels. Estimating how many people were sick, dead, or deformed would of course be much more controversial.

According to widely reported leaks, the bank concluded that about 750,000 Chinese people die prematurely each year because of pollution. But the Chinese government requested that no total figure be included in an interim version of the report released last year, because it wanted to review the methodology behind the estimate. This move was blasted around the world as yet another sign of the government's secrecy.

The odd part of the denunciation is that the report itself, which the Chinese government accepted, included every bit of shocking information except that final tally. There were calculations of childhood deaths from dysentery, lost "life-years" because of air pollution, increased hospitalization rates because of lung diseases and cancers, and other grim statistics, including the conclusion that air pollution in all its forms is probably 10 times more damaging to China's health than all forms of water

pollution. It is hard to imagine how anyone who opened the report could consider it a whitewash.

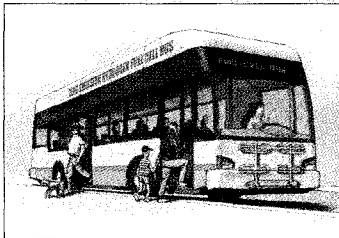
"The press reaction to the report really irritated us," the bank official said. "It's not just the Chinese—all governments we deal with are very careful with this kind of life-and-death data. All of us felt that the government was taking the exercise seriously and that it helped nobody to slap them down." Several people I spoke with at other international organizations concurred. Sure enough, in March, after the hubbub had died down, a report on environmental policy by Xinhua, the state-run news agency, mentioned offhandedly that "a World Bank report said about 750,000 Chinese die earlier due to air pollution every year."

The Chinese Communist Party unquestionably rules China, but in a more haphazard and uneven fashion than Westerners often recognize. About some things it is as inflexible, intolerant, and oblivious to outside criticism as the worst stereotypes would suggest. These hard-line areas include political challenges to the party's legitimacy, criticism in the media, and any suggestion of regional separatism or "splittism"—notably, uprisings in Tibet fomented by what the state-run media always refer to, in English, as the "Dalai clique." About many other matters, ranging from the daily practices of mayors or provincial governors to the deals struck by entrepreneurs, the central Communist government in Beijing is either unable to impose its will or uninterested in even trying. Economic development has been fastest in the parts of the country—mainly the south, far from Beijing—where the central government has been most hands-off.

The varied nature of the government's approach explains a theme I heard in many interviews. Both Chinese and foreign environmentalists said the government is sending subtle but important bureaucratic signals that it now takes environmental protection more seriously. It is more tolerant of Chinese and foreign nongovernmental organizations working for green causes. It is allowing more of its citizens a chance to defend their environmental rights via lawsuits or organized protests. And it is changing the way it promotes and rewards its own officials, to move them toward an environmentalist outlook. There are still huge pressures in the opposite direction, like payoffs to mayors or governors from land developers. But the new signals are positive.

For example: until recently the curriculum at the Central Communist Party School, where future administrators are trained, included no environmental training whatsoever. In U.S. military terms, this was like the days when war colleges taught future generals nothing about counterinsurgency. That is now changing. I talked with two foreign representatives of nongovernmental organizations—Peggy Liu, of the Joint U.S.-China Cooperation on Clean Energy (JUCCE), and Lila Buckley, of the

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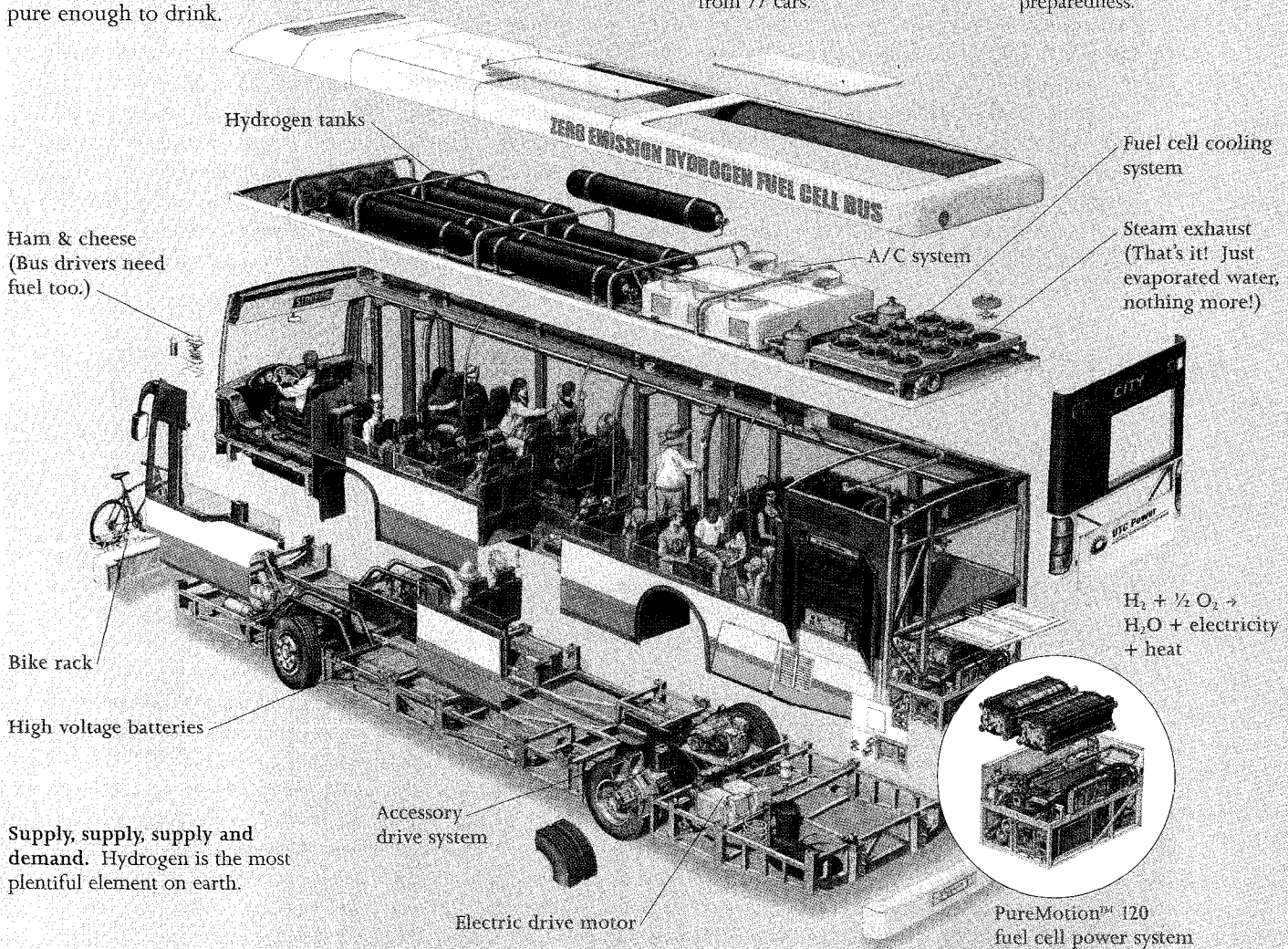
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It's a bus!
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*For decade ending 2007.

Global Environmental Institute (GEI)—that have been working with the central and provincial party schools to develop new courses and emphases. Liu, a Chinese American veteran of the tech and venture-capital industries who now lives in Shanghai, started JUCCEE last year as a way of pooling Chinese and international efforts on the environment (its name is pronounced “juice” in English and “*ju si*” in Chinese, meaning “coalition of thinkers”). The group is developing bilingual Web sites intended to connect Chinese scientists, officials, and bureaucrats with their counterparts overseas, and is trying to connect party officials and factory managers across the country with international advisers.

“This can be like the Human Genome Project,” Liu said, referring to the way researchers around the world used the Internet to share the computational work of decoding the genome, thus completing the project in a decade rather than a century. So far, she said, the Chinese government has welcomed rather than impeded her projects. “The

Chinese universities to bring in foreign experts. In 2006, GEI took two 12-member delegations of party instructors to the United States for three weeks of sustainable-development training at Stanford and Yale and for visits to the World Bank, Resources for the Future, and similar organizations.

By all accounts, the most important change in China’s bureaucratic culture is revising the performance-rating system for officials so they are graded on environmental protection rather than mainly on economic growth. To explain the long-term significance this can have, it is useful to think of the professional U.S. military, which resembles China’s nationwide Communist administrative system in this way: ambitious young officers are rotated through a variety of command posts on their way to the top. In both, the organizational culture is continually reinforced through mid-career training—war college for future U.S. generals, party schools for future ministers and provincial governors. And career success depends

Greenpeace China is quoted frequently in the press—
yes, the Chinese press. Environmental exposés are
increasingly tolerated, and they draw widespread attention.

government’s green policies are among the most progressive in the world—seriously,” she told me. “The challenge is to build an environmentally conscious workforce and have it pervade at every level. It’s as if Starbucks were building a whole coffee culture at once.”

GEI, one of China’s few home-grown, locally run environmental NGOs, also trains future government leaders. Chinese authorities keep such a careful eye on NGOs that the very concept of a “non”-governmental organization is peculiar in China—and all the more so since the tradition of civic action is so weak. Still, GEI has been free to conduct traditional conservation efforts such as supporting wildlife reserves; it has promoted wider adoption of energy-saving systems like the one used in the Sunnsy cement factory; and it has brought to the Tibetan hinterland simple, cheap “biogas converters” with which Tibetan villagers produce fuel for heating and cooking from yak or cattle dung. (What about the smell? Buckley, an American in her 20s who is GEI’s only non-Chinese staff member, told me that the villages smell better with the converters than they did before, when the villagers burned the dried dung, and heaps of dung patties polluted their drinking water.)

And GEI has made a major push for a presence in party schools. This has required some delicate maneuvering, since the schools have naturally been slower than regular

heavily on performance evaluations at the end of each assignment, which determine who moves up and who is sidetracked. Shifts in the rating system have a predictable and profound effect on individual behavior.

China’s national laws about air and water pollution are also shifting in an environmentally responsible direction. In China even more than in the United States, law is one thing and reality is another—but in general, I was told, these pollution standards are being taken more seriously than they used to be. For instance, this spring a spokesman for the Shanghai Economic Commission announced the city’s 20 goals for the coming year. Energy conservation and pollution control were at the top of the list.

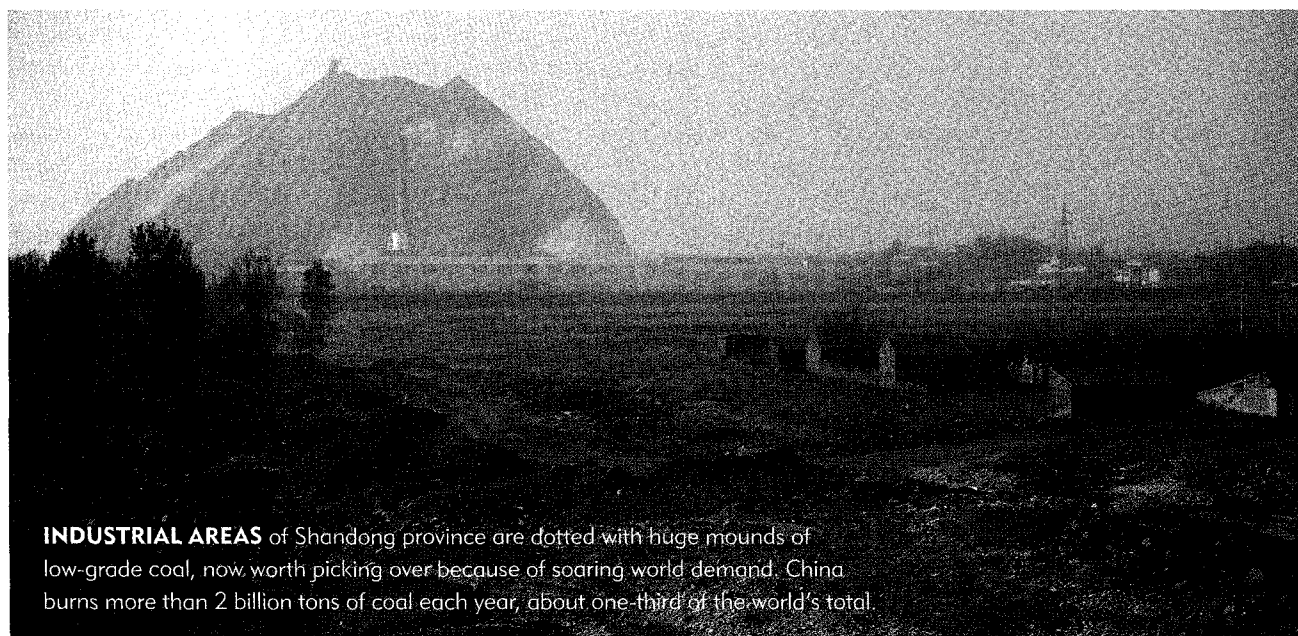
“My sense is that local political leaders and the heads of big state-owned businesses understand that they really will be held accountable,” Charles McElwee, an American environmental lawyer based in Shanghai, told me. The goals are quite explicit. For example, greater Shanghai is supposed to improve its “energy efficiency”—the amount of energy used per 10,000 RMB (renminbi, the Chinese currency) of economic output—by 4 percent each year. The nationwide goal is to increase energy efficiency by 20 percent and decrease emissions of major pollutants by 10 percent by 2010, compared with 2006 levels. That goal is theoretically still within reach, though last year’s achievements fell short (for instance, energy efficiency

improved by 3.3 rather than 4 percent). Last year, the reported level of COD—chemical oxygen demand, a major indicator of water pollution—went down by more than 3 percent nationwide, and the level of sulfur dioxide, a major air pollutant, by more than 4.6 percent. “When I saw those figures, it changed my perception of how things were headed in China,” McElwee said.

In parallel with its own incentives on environmental issues, the government has warily tolerated forms of organized citizen action that it would usually restrict. Even as it has opened the country economically and socially, the

Jane Goodall’s organization has started “Roots & Shoots” programs to teach Chinese children about environmental problems. Early this year, thousands of people poured into the streets of Shanghai to protest the downtown extension of a Maglev train line, which they believed would give off dangerous radiation near their homes. There was a similar mass protest last year about factory pollution in the coastal manufacturing town of Xiamen.

“China’s greatest environmental achievement over the past decade has been the growth of environmental activism among the Chinese people,” Elizabeth Economy,



INDUSTRIAL AREAS of Shandong province are dotted with huge mounds of low-grade coal, now worth picking over because of soaring world demand. China burns more than 2 billion tons of coal each year, about one-third of the world’s total.

government has tried hard to limit independent sources of information and any type of organization outside its control. Yet Greenpeace maintains programs and offices in China, where it has launched an aggressive (by Chinese standards) campaign to persuade consumers not to buy furniture made of rain-forest wood, not to eat shark-fin soup, not to waste energy—and not to buy products from Chinese or foreign companies that undermine these goals. Greenpeace China is quoted frequently in the press—yes, the Chinese press. Environmental exposés are increasingly tolerated, as political exposés are not, and they draw widespread attention.

The rule of law is still shaky in China, but Chinese environmental lawyers have filed and sometimes won suits on behalf of citizens who are sick because of pollution or whose farms have been poisoned. A former journalist named Ma Jun has created the remarkable online “China Water Pollution Map” for his Beijing-based group, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs. Anyone using the Internet can zoom in on a city or village, click on a lake or river, and see the latest pollution readings—and also which factories or farms are creating the problem.

author of *The River Runs Black*, told me in an e-mail. “They have pushed the boundaries of environmental protection well beyond anything imaginable a decade ago.”

How do we measure the good against the bad, the signs of progress against the devastated landscape and opaque skies? Here are three propositions to suggest, followed by one big challenge China poses to the world.

The first is simply that we acknowledge that the authors of the 11th Five-Year Plan were right. There are positive developments in China. And the situation is grave.

Renewable energy? More of it is coming online every day. Indeed, one of the world’s leading producers of photovoltaic cells, Suntech Power, is based in Wuxi, near Shanghai. It is listed on the New York Stock Exchange, and its owner, Shi Zhengrong, is a billionaire. I have seen large windmill farms in Xinjiang province, where GE and Siemens compete to sell turbines. But because demand for power is increasing much faster than renewable supply, China burns about 10 percent more coal each year than it did the year before.

Automobiles? A similar picture. China recently adopted fuel-efficiency standards higher than those in the United States. But China now has only about one-twentieth as many cars per person as the United States does—about 35 million cars for 1.3 billion Chinese, versus 185 million cars for 300 million Americans. It will close that gap, and even though China's cars will become more efficient, there will be a lot, lot more of them. According to a recent analysis by the McKinsey Global Institute, China will have about 120 million vehicles by 2020. Outsiders, then, should give the Chinese credit for what they are achieving, without forgetting how much there is to do.

Second, the major problem with government policy in China is essentially the same one as in the United States: despite the differences in political systems and overall wealth, both governments are afraid to make the public pay the true cost of cleaning up the country. And that could slow the process, by many years.

What the United States has done for decades with oil and gasoline—namely, keep prices as low as possible, so its citizens can live the good life—the Chinese government has done with even more necessities. Gasoline is cheaper than in the United States, because the government subsidizes the refineries. Water, electricity, agricultural fertilizer, and above all coal—they all cost Chinese consumers less than their “real” cost to the country, in both environmental and economic terms.

“Just because a country is poor is not a reason to subsidize scarce goods,” David Dollar, an American who directs the World Bank's China and Mongolia operations, told me in his office in Beijing. He explained the point this way: some places in northern China and Mongolia use more water per capita than much of Europe, even though they're mostly desert and have nearly exhausted their aquifers.

VINEGAR AND OIL

Wrong solitude vinegars the soul,
right solitude oils it.

How fragile we are, between the few good moments.

Coming and going unfinished,
puzzled by fate,

like the half-carved relief
of a fallen donkey, above a church door in Finland.

—JANE HIRSHFIELD

Jane Hirshfield's 2006 collection, *After*, was a finalist for England's T. S. Eliot Prize. She received an Academy Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets in 2004.

That's because they are allowed to pay so little for water. If people had to pay more, they would use less: “Chinese people,” Dollar said, “tend to be very practical, if I may put it that way.” The same is true of fertilizers. China's rivers and lakes are so foul in part because chemical fertilizers are subsidized. Farmers overuse them, and the runoff kills streams. If fertilizer cost more, farmers would use less, and less runoff would end up in streams. The Chinese government is planning a continental-scale system of canals to bring water from the south to the arid north. But over the next decades, Dollar argues, tens of millions of people are going to leave the northern farms for urban jobs in any case. It would be far saner—economically and environmentally—to scale back the canal-building and steer farms, factories, and people to the south, where the water is.

The urban version of this pattern involves electricity, gasoline, and public water supplies, all of them cheaper for consumers than their real cost to the country and the environment. Here, too, changes in price and policy can make large differences. For example: the Shanghai city government makes owning a car very expensive, and has relatively manageable traffic and excellent subways. The Beijing city government makes it cheap, and is being strangled and choked by cars.

“Underpriced energy is the world's largest subsidy for environmental destruction,” William Chandler, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote in a report this spring. “The Chinese government continues to intervene heavily in energy pricing, recently even freezing—in a profoundly wrongheaded move—key energy prices.”

David Dollar is not Ebenezer Scrooge. The World Bank's recommendations for realistic prices include many schemes to offset the burden they would place on the country's impoverished majority. But he recognizes the trap the government is in. If China keeps these prices down, it will have even more trouble producing positive developments of any sort. If it lets them rise, it will face the anger of people for whom inflation is already the No. 1 domestic concern. Americans who reflect on their own experience with proposed hikes in gasoline taxes will recognize the difficulty of the choice.

The third proposition, which is more hopeful: the business of improving China's environment can be a very attractive business indeed. For corporations, it can mean profits, as with the newly efficient cement factories. For the world as a whole, it opens the possibility of a longer-term profit, in dealing with shared climate-change problems. Over the past 20 years, the world got used to a “China price” for manufactured goods—the rock-bottom price for anything coming out of a factory. In the coming 20 years, the world could make use of a “China price” for pollution control, especially greenhouse gases—the rock-bottom

requirement of money and resources needed to reduce emissions by a given amount. Precisely because many Chinese systems are now so wasteful, it can be cheaper and easier to eliminate the next thousand tons of carbon-dioxide output or the demand for the next million watts of electricity-generating capacity here than anywhere else.

Late last year I went to Tsinghua University in Beijing, China's counterpart to MIT, to hear an American businessman address a group of young Chinese engineers. The visiting speaker was George David, the CEO of United Technologies Corporation, and he had come to give a lecture that at first struck me as implausibly upbeat.

China consumes less energy per person than America, David said, because its people live so simply, and so many are on farms. But China's economy consumes much more energy per unit of economic output than America's—about four times as much, in fact—and that, he said, is good news. So is the fact that China's homes, schools, and office buildings are so wasteful in the ways they use energy for heating and cooling. China's traffic system suffers extreme congestion, which wastes more fuel. More good news! "The U.S. is tremendously inefficient, and

maintaining them, accounts for nearly 40 percent of total energy demand—even more than the energy used by all forms of transportation. Chinese office buildings and apartments are leakier than those in developed countries. They require about twice as much fuel to heat and cool as those in similar climates in Europe or North America, because many were built in the days when insulation was one of many unaffordable luxuries. Therefore, in principle it's cheap and easy to cut their power use: more insulation in existing buildings, higher standards for new ones.

Heating water by itself accounts for about 15 percent of the energy used in buildings. Switching to a different, technically proven means of heating water—"heat transfer" instead of "heat insertion"—would so dramatically improve efficiency that, according to David, it could lower total world energy demand by several percentage points.

Thus a corporate opportunity and an environmental opportunity coincide. Selling equipment and many other "green building" features to and within China will save money by cutting waste, plus modernize factories to reduce their energy use too. For George David's arch-competitor, General Electric, that might mean selling

The business of improving China's environment can be a very attractive business indeed.

China is worse," David said. "That is what gives us the opportunity"—both commercial opportunity for companies like his and strategic opportunity for groups fighting climate change worldwide.

He went on to make a point that became obvious once explained: precisely because so much of the Chinese system is profligate and sloppy, the opportunity to improve efficiency, and cut back on pollution and energy use, is greater here than nearly anywhere else—and the savings can be achieved more cheaply. The energy wastefulness of China's economy affects the entire world because of the greenhouse gases it generates. And so as the world looks for ways to cut those emissions, China offers fast, easy, and inexpensive opportunities for improvement. For businesses, this means a market for efficient engines, sewage-treatment plants, solar cells and similar "clean" energy sources, and other technologies that help control pollution. For those working to control greenhouse-gas emissions, it means a fast, cheap way to make a difference.

David gave this illustration: commercial and residential buildings are a deceptively important source of pollution and greenhouse-gas emissions. Worldwide, the energy needed to heat, cool, and illuminate buildings, together with the energy costs of putting them up and

windmill turbines to China; for his own UTC, it means selling elevators that, like hybrid cars, generate power whenever they brake and thus substantially cut total energy use. This in turn would have obvious benefits to the world. David and 10 other CEOs from industrial companies in North America, Europe, and Japan have formed the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, which is pushing for similar innovations in urban design and building construction.

I saw one demonstration in a manufacturing zone an hour's drive west of Shanghai. A factory there will, when it becomes operational in a few months, produce a radically different sort of window glass for use in office buildings. The company, called Envision, is based in Alberta, Canada, and uses a technique designed in the 1980s in Switzerland. It replaces the double-glazed windows normally used in apartments and offices with a complex structure that looks like a normal pane but has internal membranes and other devices that almost totally block the transmission of heat. These are the windows used at the U.S. National Science Foundation's research station at the South Pole, and they have been widely adopted in cold-climate buildings around the world—a government building in Minnesota, the airport in St. Louis, more than 500 installations in Canada

and Europe. The company has a factory in Edmonton, Alberta, and another in Switzerland, where the equipment being installed near Shanghai was previously used.

At the factory, Albert Wong showed me the difference the windows could make. Wong, who is in his 50s, grew up in Shanghai and then studied chemistry at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge. (Time for a reminder: America's universities are *the* crucial connection between the U.S. and China.) He worked for Shell Oil and DuPont; he became a Canadian citizen; and five years ago he returned to China to sell his windows. His company has taken infrared photos of Chinese buildings at night. The typical ones blaze red with radiating heat: much of what comes into the building, from the furnaces, goes right out through the panes. (As I write this, I am sitting in a two-star Chinese hotel in the hinterland. It is cold and windy outside, and the breeze through the half-inch gap between the window glass and its frame ruffles the papers on the desk.) Then he showed me comparable photos of buildings with his windows. They are deep blue, the heat trapped inside.

These windows cost 10 percent more than standard glass. But if specified from the start, they can reduce construction costs for an entire building by 15 percent or more, since the heating and air-conditioning systems can be reduced by half. Plus, they save money each year on fuel.

The bad news is that not one of the windows is used in China yet. After five years of effort, Wong has yet to make a single sale here. The factory near Shanghai will supply customers in Korea, Japan, North America—but not the surrounding provinces. The barriers are the conservatism of the construction industry (not the most adventurous group in any country), and the fact that even if his windows save coal for China, they will cut out an existing glass manufacturer.

Many green businesses are already enjoying better luck, and Wong says that Envision is in China for the long haul. But his start-up difficulties illustrate the importance of helping Chinese factory owners, builders, and citizens realize the many opportunities for saving energy—and money—and reducing emissions that are open to them. “China has a golden opportunity to leapfrog old, inefficient technologies and introduce cutting-edge technologies at a relatively early stage of development,” the McKinsey analysis said.

In one way or another, all the proposals for helping China make this new great leap forward do the same thing: apply money or other rewards or penalties to steer China in a greener direction, for instance, stricter requirements for the windows in office buildings. Many of the proposals involve a concept that the Bush administration has rejected but that Senators John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama all support: a world market in “carbon credits.” When a million dollars spent on better building standards in China—or better smelters, or smokestack scrubbers, or any of a hundred other possibilities—could

make a bigger difference in controlling world pollution than that same million dollars spent in the United States or France, there should be a way to make sure that million dollars gets spent in China.

“When I was a child, it was incredible for my father to have even one cold beer,” a man named Sean Wang, who works for Envision, told me recently. He grew up in Beijing in the 1970s. “Now people want 24-hour heating, hot water, refrigerators. It is not sustainable unless we make a change.” We met in a shiny and spectacular new office tower in central Beijing. In every direction around us in the city were construction and bustle. In every direction around us in the country were people moving from the villages, where they had a few flickering lightbulbs and a bicycle, to the city, where they expected elevators, cars, and espresso machines.

The conclusions I’ve suggested so far all bear on the ways that China’s environment might be improving, however slowly, and whether and how that improvement might be speeded up. All of these improvements lead to one further and now unanswerable question, which is raised by Sean Wang’s comments. Promising as some trends might be, bright as is the potential for efficient, money-making green investments, does China’s scale and ambition, plus its reliance on coal, simply doom the world’s effort to control greenhouse-gas emissions?

China is no idle bystander to this discussion. Its major rivers originate in glaciers on the Tibetan plateau, which have begun to melt. Even if every building in China is better insulated and built with Albert Wong’s windows, and every factory is equipped with Tang Jinqian’s co-generation pipes, is China’s newfound commitment coming too late? One data point among hundreds: a recent study by Maximilian Auffhammer and Richard Carson, of the University of California, concluded that without some startling change in technology, China cannot avoid increasing its greenhouse-gas emissions faster than other countries can possibly cut theirs back.

Startling changes in technology have appeared over the past century. Antibiotics, to name the one that has made the biggest difference in human welfare. Telecommunications, from the radio to the Internet. Air travel and knowing our world from space. Startling changes in energy technology are now necessary—in producing, conserving, and containing the by-products of fossil-fuel combustion. This is the next big technological challenge for the world as a whole.

The world will have more time to work toward a solution if it nurtures promising developments in China—and if it recognizes that its most populous nation is doing some things right. ▀

James Fallows is an Atlantic national correspondent; his blog is at jamesfallows.theatlantic.com.



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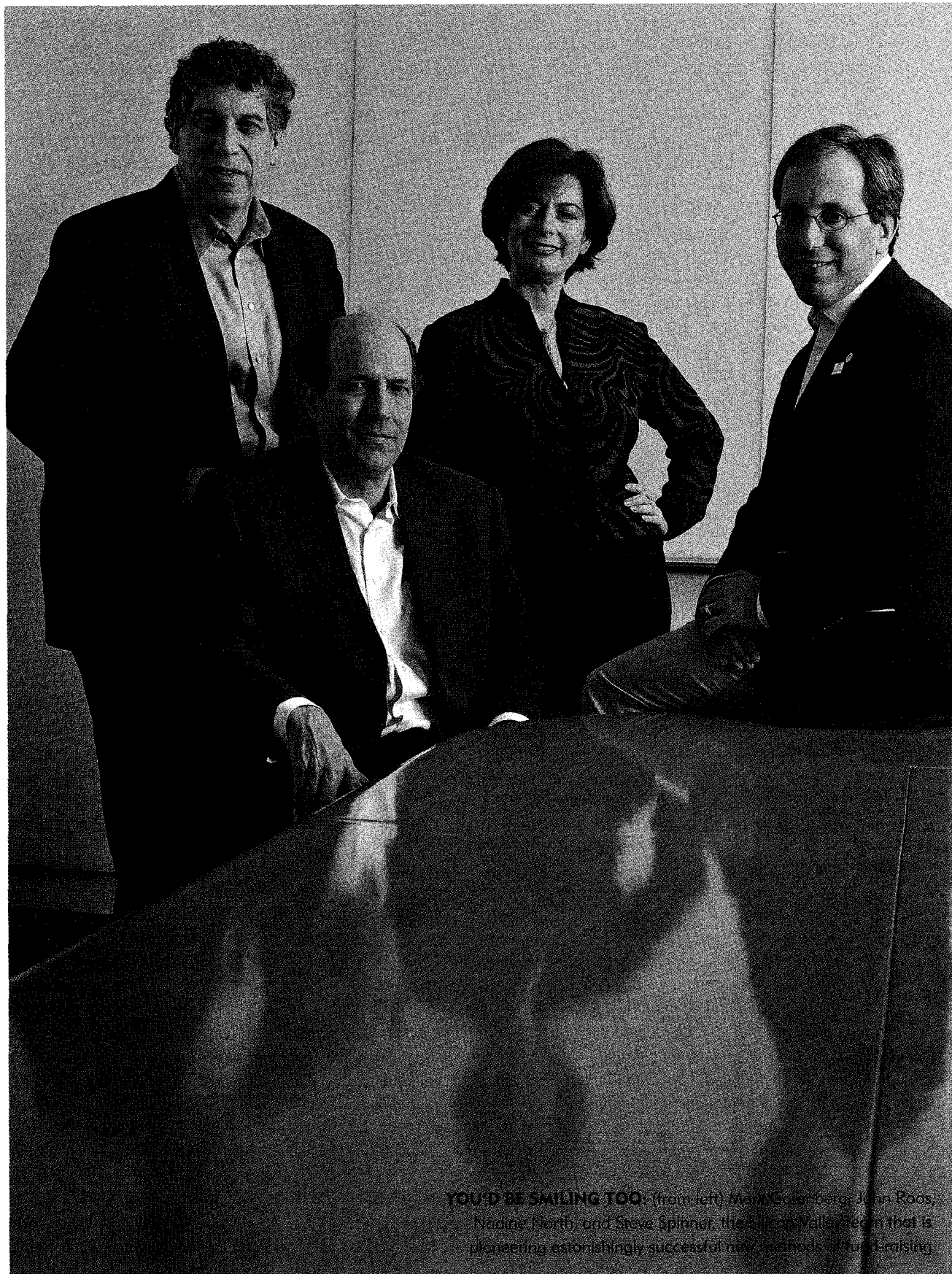
How Silicon Valley made Barack Obama
this year's hottest start-up

BY JOSHUA GREEN

Photograph by Jonathan Sprague

The Amazing Money Machine

History has a way of prizing timeless qualities like vision and oratory above temporal things like money. So if Barack Obama becomes our nation's first black president, civics textbooks will probably never note his fund-raising prowess or the financial challenges he had to overcome simply to compete with the likes of Hillary Clinton. But Obama would not be where he is today if he did not possess a preternatural ability to elicit huge sums. Obama prompts an impulse in people to reach for historical antecedents when describing him—as a speaker, Martin Luther King Jr.; as an inspiration to young voters, Robert F. Kennedy. No one I'm aware of has suggested an apt comparison for Obama, the mighty fund-raiser. But whenever I think about the quarter billion dollars he has raised so far, the image that leaps to mind is Scrooge McDuck diving joyously into his piles of gold. »



YOU'D BE SMILING TOO: (from left) Mark Garberberg, John Roos, Nadine North, and Steve Spinner, the Silicon Valley team that is pioneering astonishingly successful new methods of fund-raising.

The story of Obama's success is very much a story about money. It provided his initial credibility. It paid for his impressive campaign operation. It allowed him first to compete with, and then to overwhelm, the most powerful Democratic family in a generation—one that understood the power of money in politics and commanded a network of wealthy donors that has financed the Democratic Party for years.

What's intriguing to Democrats and worrisome to Republicans is how someone lacking these deep connections to traditional sources of wealth could raise so much money so quickly. *How did he do it?* The answer is that he built a fund-raising machine quite unlike anything seen before in national politics. Obama's machine attracts large and small donors alike, those who want to give money and those who want to raise it, veteran activists and first-time contributors, and—especially—anyone who is wired to anything: computer, cell phone, PDA.

Here's another thing: he is doing it almost effortlessly. That is to say, in an era when the imperative for campaign dollars demands more and more of a politician's time and lurks behind so many recent scandals (including the auctioning-off of the Lincoln Bedroom), Obama has raised more money than anybody else without plumbing ethical gray areas or even spending much of his own time soliciting donations. During the month of February, for example, his campaign raised a record-setting \$55 million—\$45 million of it over the Internet—without the candidate himself hosting a single fund-raiser. The money just came rolling in.

Obama's campaign is admired by insiders of both parties for its functional beauty—not just admired but gawked at, like some futuristic concept car leaking rocket vapor at an auto show. Obama's campaign has made a similar leap in how it has applied technology to the practices of raising money and organizing, and it is already the clear model for everyone else.

To get a better sense of why it has succeeded, I opted to undergo the full tech immersion while reporting this piece, and soon had Obama ring tones on my phone, new networks of online "friends," text-message updates from the campaign, and regular e-mails from its manager, all gently encouraging me to give money, volunteer time, bring in new friends, and generally reorient my life in ways that were made to seem hip and fun—and inexorably aimed at the greater glory of Barack Obama. How Obama arrived at this new model for campaigning is a tale of foresight and circumstance, his campaign's enterprise and his opponent's shortsightedness, and it has as much to do with Silicon Valley as it does with Washington politics.

Obama is a gifted politician by anyone's measure, but what distinguishes him from earlier insurgents is his ability to fully harness the excitement that his candidacy has created, in votes and in dollars. Three forces had to come

together for this to happen: the effect of campaign-finance laws in broadening the number and types of people who fund the political process; the emergence of Northern California as one of the biggest sources of Democratic money; and the recognition by a few Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and venture capitalists that the technology and business practices they had developed in their day jobs could have a transformative effect on national politics.

A few days after Obama announced his \$55 million figure, I went to Silicon Valley to meet some of these people, and to find out how they saw the future coming and got there first.

Mark Gorenberg decided to start fund-raising in earnest during the early days of John Kerry's presidential campaign, back when Barack Obama was considered merely a comer in Illinois politics. Granted, that was all of five years ago. But it was a different world then, at least in the elite fund-raising circles Gorenberg was entering. Every election cycle, politicians looking for money traveled a well-worn circuit of important donors.

Two big changes had just come about when Kerry got going in 2003. The McCain-Feingold campaign-finance law had taken effect for the first time in a presidential campaign, limiting the large "soft money" donations to political parties that Democrats in particular relied on; for years, they had solicited large donations from corporations and the rich to build the party. Now the only way to raise money was to attract small donors, a task Democrats had never done well. (The law limited individual donations to a presidential candidate to \$2,000 for the primary and general elections each in 2004; the limit increased to \$2,300 for 2008.) The other important change was the Iraq War, which had energized the Democratic Party.

Gorenberg, a partner in the San Francisco venture-capital firm of Hummer Winblad, was representative of a certain kind of prosperous Northern California Democrat whom the war and the general climate of Bush-administration malfeasance had pushed from casual supporter to committed activist. And he was representative of Silicon Valley, in that he thought in terms of networks. Partly, this was his job: a venture capitalist looking to invest in the next big thing must know everything that is happening and everyone who is making it happen. But everyone else was thinking about networks, too. The Valley was still emerging from the crash of 2001, yet it was already clear that the next boom would be in social-networking entities like MySpace and Facebook, which created vast, interconnected communities on the Web.

Political fund-raising, on the other hand, was stuck in an earlier era. "Take a typical Gore event in 2000," Gorenberg, an affable and slightly ruffled engineer, told me when I visited his office in a converted brick warehouse



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on the Embarcadero. "By the time he was the nominee, a fund-raiser might be 20 people in a living room who'd given \$100,000 to the party, and 50 to 100 in the backyard at \$5,000."

The engineer in Gorenberg was bothered by the system's obvious inefficiency. Relying exclusively on the rich put limits on who got involved, and by design the new campaign-finance laws weakened their influence. He had an idea about how networks could help. "If the most that any one person could write a check for was \$2,000," he said, "then the important people suddenly became those who would put their hand up and say, 'I'll raise \$50,000 or \$100,000.'" Ever since Watergate-era campaign-finance laws put limits on the amount that an individual can give to a presidential candidate, "bundlers" who are able to gather many individual checks have been important figures, most recently the "Pioneers" and "Rangers" in George W. Bush's presidential campaigns. But in the past, everyone tended to draw from the same moneyed crowd.

Gorenberg tapped into his broad network of entrepreneurs and venture capitalists and discovered that many

With guidance from Nancy Pelosi, San Francisco's reigning power, the pair chose 10 races that looked like good possibilities to help Democrats pick up the 15 seats they needed to regain control. But they worried about how to raise money for a slate of House candidates who lacked the glamour of a presidential nominee. They found their answer in the software industry. After the Internet bubble burst, software companies had been unable to sell expensive systems. Marc Benioff, the CEO of Salesforce.com, hit upon a solution when he dropped the practice of charging full price up front in favor of a subscription model that charged a little at a time for access to software. The idea appealed to companies that lacked the budget or the appetite to write another big check, while the promise of recurring revenue helped reinvigorate the software industry.

North and Gorenberg borrowed the subscription model for their "Win Back the House" project. Instead of asking for a big check up front, as they would for a presidential candidate, they invited each of their House candidates to the Bay Area over the course of the year, so that supporters could give recurrent, but smaller, donations. Most of the donors were from the tech industry, and

Obama's campaign is admired by insiders for its functional beauty—gawked at like some futuristic concept car leaking rocket vapor at an auto show.

of them were eager to get involved—eager enough not just to give but to tap their own networks to raise money for Kerry. Collectively, these "raisers" generated a great deal of money, and much of it came from new sources, particularly what Gorenberg likes to call the area's new middle class. "There is a tremendous amount of wealth in Silicon Valley," John Roos, Obama's Northern California finance chair and the CEO of the Palo Alto law firm Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, told me. "Not just massive individual wealth, but wealth spread collectively among the engineers, lawyers, and executives who made gains in the good years and now have the ability to contribute a \$2,300 check without it being a significant hit to them."

By the end of the 2004 campaign, Gorenberg had surpassed all the old names to become Kerry's biggest fund-raiser. And for the first time, spurred by these expanding networks, the Bay Area eclipsed Los Angeles as the biggest source of Democratic donations in California.

In Silicon Valley, as elsewhere, Kerry's loss, while devastating, seemed only to intensify the activist zeal. Gorenberg teamed up with a friend, Nadine North, who recruits executives for tech firms, to pursue a new goal in 2006: helping Democrats win back the House of Representatives.

understood the software-subscription model. They came to enough gatherings, and kept writing enough checks, that the roster of House candidates eventually expanded from 10 to 30. As before, the emphasis was not on writing big checks but on building raiser networks, including people who couldn't contribute much themselves. By November, North and Gorenberg were among the top Democratic fund-raisers nationwide.

On election night, everyone gathered to watch the returns come in, and this time they experienced a resounding victory: Democrats recaptured the House. "Many of the candidates in the key races were ones we had supported," North told me. "It really brought the national political landscape home to Democrats in the Bay Area."

Barack Obama was new to most Americans when he entered the presidential race, in February 2007. But he was familiar to Silicon Valley in at least one way: like a hot Internet start-up in the glory years, he had great buzz, a compelling pitch, and no money to back it up. He wasn't anybody's obvious bet to succeed, not least because the market for a Democratic nominee already had its Microsoft.

This being Silicon Valley, however, Obama was quickly embraced. A few days before Obama declared, John Roos hosted a fund-raiser at his home, attended by Gorenberg and many other prominent figures. This sent an important signal to the community and added to Obama's local mystique. "There is a lot of good feeling for the Clintons in California," says Peter Leyden, the director of the New Politics Institute in San Francisco, a tech-focused think tank that is neutral in the presidential race. "But once the community here experienced Obama, that started to break up really quickly."

That early fund-raiser and others like it were important to Obama in several respects. As someone attempting to build a campaign on the fly, he needed money to operate. As someone who dared challenge Hillary Clinton, he needed a considerable amount of it. And as a newcomer to national politics, though he had grassroots appeal, he needed to establish credibility by making inroads to major donors—most of whom, in California as elsewhere, had been locked down by the Clinton campaign.

Silicon Valley was a notable exception. The Internet was still in its infancy when Bill Clinton last ran for president, in 1996, and most of the immense fortunes had not yet come into being; the emerging tech class had not yet taken shape. So, unlike the magnates in California real estate (Walter Shorenstein), apparel (Esprit founder Susie Tompkins Buell), and entertainment (name your Hollywood celeb), who all had long-established loyalty to the Clintons, the tech community was up for grabs in 2007. In a colossal error of judgment, the Clinton campaign never made a serious approach, assuming that Obama would fade and that lack of money and cutting-edge technology couldn't possibly factor into what was expected to be an easy race. Some of her staff tried to arrange "prospect meetings" in Silicon Valley, but they were overruled. "There was massive frustration about not being able to go out there and recruit people," a Clinton consultant told me last year. As a result, the wealthiest region of the wealthiest state in the nation was left to Barack Obama.

Furthermore, in Silicon Valley's unique reckoning, what everyone else considered to be Obama's major shortcomings—his youth, his inexperience—here counted as prime assets.

I asked Roos, the personification of a buttoned-down corporate attorney, if there had been concerns about Obama's limited CV, and for a moment he looked as if he might burst out laughing. "No one in Silicon Valley sits here and thinks, 'You need massive inside-the-Beltway experience,'" he explained, after a diplomatic pause. "Sergey and Larry were in their early 20s when they started Google. The YouTube guys were also in their 20s. So were the guys who started Facebook. And I'll tell you, we recognize what great companies have been built on, and that's ideas, talent, and inspirational leadership."

This was the dominant refrain as I traveled around the Valley. From a policy standpoint, there are many reasons for tech-minded types to support Obama, including his pledge to establish a chief technology officer for the federal government and to radically increase its transparency by making most government data available online. "Barack recognizes that people in Silicon Valley are not just talking about a set of technical questions," Lawrence Lessig, the Stanford law professor and noted Valley demigod, told me. "It's a broader generational issue of how to architect and orient the government on important issues, from privacy to security to competition, in ways that open up the process to everyone."

But more than any policy, the *idea* of Obama and the world he speaks for seemed to excite something deep within the limbic system of the Valley brain that manifested itself through the early and continuing financial support that was crucial to launching Obama's campaign. Getting behind Obama, especially for those who did so early, appealed to their self-image as discerning seers. Though she ultimately went with John Edwards, Nadine North captured this better than anyone: "Obama was the new, new thing, and that's what we're all about here."

When Gorenberg joined Obama's national finance committee, he was pleased to discover an institutional culture eager to embrace new ideas about building user-generated networks. The effects of this type of thinking are evident throughout the campaign, but nowhere are they more fully embodied than in the person of Steve Spinner.

Spinner is a 38-year-old entrepreneur and media executive who, when we met at a Starbucks in Menlo Park, came across as a prototypical Valley figure: bright and enthusiastic, a born networker with a dazzling command of the latest industry lingo, and someone who is a zealous exponent, in roughly equal measure, of both Northern California's business-venerating culture and Barack Obama.

Spinner had only recently become active in politics, through Gorenberg and North's "Win Back the House" effort. Although he hadn't intended to do more than write a check, he had gotten swept up in the excitement. "I know most of the VCs and entrepreneurs here," he told me, "so when companies are thinking about doing their initial fund-raising, thinking about raising \$3 million or \$5 million or \$10 million, I'm able to help a number of them by making introductions to the various VC firms that might find what they're doing attractive."

Raising money for a political cause seemed like a natural progression, though it was not without its challenges. Unlike other professionals in Silicon Valley, entrepreneurs are typically cash-starved, and therefore unlikely contributors. But as he called around to friends and contacts,

Does science make belief in God obsolete?

No, and yes.

No, as a matter of reason and truth. The knowledge we have gained through modern science makes belief in an Intelligence behind the cosmos more reasonable than ever.

Yes, as a matter of mood, sensibility, and sentiment. Not science itself but a reductive "scientific mentality" that often accompanies it, along with the power, control, comfort, and convenience provided by



modern technology, has helped to push the concept of God into the hazy twilight of agnosticism.

Superficially it may seem that the advances of science have made God obsolete by providing natural explanations for phenomena that were once thought to be the result of direct divine activity—the so-called "God of the gaps." But this advance has been the completion of a program of purification from superstition begun thousands of years ago by Athens and Jerusalem, by a handful of Greek sages and by the people of Israel, who "de-divinized" Nature to a degree unparalleled in the ancient world. Summarizing an established tradition 750 years ago, St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the wise governor ordinarily governs by delegation to competent subordinates.

In the case of Nature, God's ordinary providence governs by means of the regularities ("laws") built into the natures of created things.

This theistic outlook has been fully vindicated. As the ancient Greek materialists recognized long ago, if we wish to explain the observed world in terms of Matter without reference to Mind, then it must be explained by things material, ultimate, and very simple all at the same time...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, O.P., is a Dominican friar, the Archbishop of Vienna, Austria, a Member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Education of the Roman Catholic Church, and was lead editor of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Yes, if by...

"science" we mean the entire enterprise of secular reason and knowledge (including history and philosophy), not just people with test tubes and white lab coats.

Traditionally, a belief in God was attractive because it promised to explain the deepest puzzles about origins. Where did the world come



from? What is the basis of life? How can the mind arise from the body? Why should anyone be moral?

Yet over the millennia, there has been an inexorable trend: the deeper we probe these questions, and the more we learn about the

world in which we live, the less reason there is to believe in God.

Start with the origin of the world. Today no honest and informed person can maintain that the universe came into being a few thousand years ago and assumed its current form in six days...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Steven Pinker is the Johnstone Family Professor in the department of psychology at Harvard University. He is the author of seven books, including The Language Instinct, How the Mind Works, The Blank Slate, and most recently, The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature.

No, not at all.

As a physician and researcher, I employ science to decipher human biology and treat disease. As a person of faith, I look to my religious tradition for



the touchstones of a moral life. Neither science nor faith need contradict the other; in fact, if one appreciates the essence of each, they can enrich each other in a person's life.

So, the question of obsolescence is miscast, because science and faith should exist in separate realms. Science uses logic and experimental methods to measure and describe the material world. It yields knowledge about the workings of molecules and machines, mitosis and momentum. Science has no moral valence. It is neutral...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Jerome Groopman is the Rezanati Professor of Medicine at Harvard and author of How Doctors Think.

No, but only if...

we continue to develop new notions of God, such as a fully natural God that is the creativity in the cosmos.



Humans have been worshipping gods for thousands of years. Our sense of God in the

Western world has evolved from Abraham's jealous God Yahweh to the God of love of the New Testament. Science and faith have split modern societies just as some form of global civilization is emerging. One result is a retreat into religious fundamentalisms, often bitterly hostile. The schism between science and religion can be healed, but it will require a slow evolution from a supernatural, theistic God to a new sense of a fully natural God as our chosen symbol for the ceaseless creativity in the natural universe. This healing may also require a transformation of science to a new scientific worldview with a place for the ceaseless creativity in the universe that we can call God.

We must "reinvent the sacred," but it is dangerous: it implies that the sacred is invented. For billions of believers this is Godless heresy. Yet how many gods have we worshiped down the eons? It is we who have told our gods what is sacred, not they who have told us. This does not

To read these essays in their entirety, or to receive a printed version, visit www.templeton.org/belief

mean that what we deem sacred is not sacred. It means something wonderful: What we deem sacred is our own choice...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Stuart Kauffman is the director of the Institute for Biocomplexity and Informatics at the University of Calgary and an external professor at the Santa Fe Institute. His most recent book is Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion.

No.

Despite the fact that I'm an atheist, I recognize that belief offers something that science does not.

Science isn't remotely about a scientist announcing truths or The Truth. It's about stating things with a certain degree of certainty. A scientist will say, "In this experiment, I observed that A causes B; it didn't happen every single time, and my statistical analyses show that I



can be X percent certain that this A/B connection didn't happen by chance." The convention in

most scientific papers is that you don't report something until you're more than 95 percent certain. It is impossible with statistics to state something with 100 percent certainty.

Now, I'm not trying to be a postmodernist gibbering about how science is a purely subjective process and there are no

objective truths. There are truths, and scientific knowledge produces temporary points of solid ground in pursuit of them. An observation must have predictive power and be capable of independent replication by others. And scientists must be willing to abandon supposed knowledge when a completely different explanation arises...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Robert Sapolsky is John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn Professor of Biological Sciences and professor of neurology and neurological sciences at Stanford University. He is the author of Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, The Trouble with Testosterone, and A Primate's Memoir.

Of course not.

Science itself does not contradict the hypothesis of God.

Rather, it gives us a window on a dynamic and creative universe that expands our appreciation of the Divine in ways that could not have been imagined in ages past.

As an outspoken defender of evolution, I am often challenged by those who assume that if science can demonstrate the natural origins of our species, which it surely has, then God



should be abandoned. But the Deity they reject so easily is not the one I know. To be threatened by science, God would have to be nothing more than a placeholder for human

ignorance. This is the God of the creationists, of the "intelligent design" movement, of those who seek their God in darkness. What we have not found and do not yet understand becomes their best—indeed their only—evidence for faith. As a Christian, I find the flow of this logic particularly depressing. Not only does it teach us to fear the acquisition of knowledge (which might at any time disprove belief), but it also suggests that God dwells only in the shadows of our understanding...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Kenneth R. Miller is a professor of biology at Brown University and the author of Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution and of Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America's Soul.

No.

Far from making belief in God obsolete, some interpretations of modern science provide positive reinforcement for belief in God.



The methodology of the natural sciences requires the formulation of fruitful questions about

the nature of the world that can be answered by careful and repeatable observations. The use of controlled experiments aids the construction of illuminating schemes of classification or of causal hypotheses that explain why things are as they are. The

development of mathematical techniques for describing and predicting observable regularities is usually an important part of a scientific approach to the world...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Keith Ward is a Fellow of the British Academy, an ordained priest in the Church of England, a Canon of Christ Church, Oxford, and the author of Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding, Is Religion Dangerous?, and Re-Thinking Christianity.

No, but it should.

Until about 1832, when it first seems to have become established as a noun and a concept,



the term "scientist" had no really independent meaning. "Science" meant "knowledge" in

much the same way as "physic" meant medicine, and those who conducted experiments or organized field expeditions or managed laboratories were known as "natural philosophers." To these gentlemen (for they were mainly gentlemen) the belief in a divine presence or inspiration was often merely assumed to be a part of the natural order, in rather the same way as it was assumed—or actually insisted upon—that a teacher at Cambridge University swear an oath to be an ordained Christian minister...

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Christopher Hitchens is the author of God Is Not Great and the editor of The Portable Atheist.

JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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Spinner was surprised to find many of them eager to give and thankful to have found an outlet for political expression. Things quickly took off. He hosted an event in his home in 2006 that was headlined by Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano. "I realized, 'Wow, I can do this,'" he told me. "And so I got totally hooked. On election night, I had an ownership stake in the effort."

Eager to get involved in a presidential campaign, Spinner accompanied Gorenberg to the February fund-raiser at John Roos's house and, somewhat to his own surprise, found himself volunteering to raise \$25,000. Like so many of his Valley colleagues, Spinner was instantly infatuated with Obama and certain that supporting him was the right play. "I'm a start-up guy," he told me. "We take measured bets. We will place a lot of money on something that has a greater likelihood of failure than success, but there has to be a path—if you've got the right plan and the right leadership, the game can be won. That's how I looked at Obama."

Spinner began sending out e-mails, tapping into his network. He browsed friends' profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook, and MyYahoo, trying to determine who might be a Democrat and donate. One friend also wanted to raise money for Obama, so Spinner brought him aboard. He soon exceeded his \$25,000 goal.

The campaign's focal point is My.BarackObama.com, which has made better use of technology than its rivals since the beginning. As a consequence of this fact and the general enthusiasm over the candidate, Obama's Chicago-based staff is constantly besieged by suitors offering the latest applications, services, software, and widgets. Since many are based in Silicon Valley, Spinner volunteered his services as a talent scout.

To understand how Obama's war chest has grown so rapidly, it helps to think of his Web site as an extension of the social-networking boom that has consumed Silicon Valley over the past few years. The purpose of social networking is to connect friends and share information, its animating idea being that people will do this more readily and comfortably when the information comes to them from a friend rather than from a newspaper or expert or similarly distant authority they don't know and trust. The success of social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace and, later, professional networking sites like LinkedIn all but ensured that someday the concept would find its way into campaigning. A precursor, Meetup.com, helped supporters of Howard Dean organize gatherings during the last Democratic primary season, but compared with today's sites, it was a blunt instrument.

The social-networking model provided Obama with something that insurgents before him, from Gary Hart to John McCain, always lacked: a means of capturing excitement and translating it into money.

This brought an invitation from Obama's national finance chair, Penny Pritzker, to join the national finance committee and commit to raising \$250,000. Spinner thought about it, and took the plunge. He'd been surprised by the excitement he'd encountered for Obama, but also by the lack of a forum to discuss it. So he established what Web denizens would call an affinity group, "Entrepreneurs for Obama," to serve this untapped market. Obama appeared before the group by videoconference in May and was a smash hit. Almost overnight, a whole new network, which would yield its own spin-offs, had come into being and gone to work for the candidate. And in a period of weeks, Spinner, who had never raised a dime for a presidential campaign, had gone from neophyte to mid-six-figure Obama fund-raiser.

What ultimately transformed the presidential race—what swept Obama past his rivals to dizzying new levels of campaign wealth—was not the money that poured in from Silicon Valley but the technology and the ethos.

Obama's campaign moved first. Staffers credit the candidate himself with recognizing the importance of this new tool and claim that his years as a community organizer in Chicago allowed him to see its usefulness. Another view is that he benefited greatly from encouraging a culture of innovation and lucked out in the personnel department, with his own pair of 20-something wizards. Joe Rospars, a veteran of Dean's campaign who had gone on to found an Internet fund-raising company, signed on as Obama's new-media director. And Chris Hughes, a co-founder of Facebook, took a sabbatical from the company and came to Chicago to work on the campaign full-time.

When My.BarackObama.com launched, at the start of the campaign, its lineage was clear. The site is a social-networking hub centered on the candidate and designed to give users a practically unlimited array of ways to participate in the campaign. You can register to vote or start your own affinity group, with a listserv for your friends. You can download an Obama news widget to stay current, or another one (which Spinner found) that scrolls Obama's biography, with pictures, in an endless loop. You

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A CASE OF EXPLODING LANGOES MOHAMMED H

John le Carré calls it
"vitty, elegant, and
deliciously anarchic."

Entertaining & Illuminating” Booklist

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THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME

Hub Knorr  **Knorr.com**

can click a "Make Calls" button, receive a list of phone numbers, and spread the good news to voters across the country, right there in your home. You can get text-message updates on your mobile phone and choose from among 12 Obama-themed ring tones, so that each time Mom calls you will hear Barack Obama cry "Yes we can!" and be reminded that Mom should register to vote, too.

"We've tried to bring two principles to this campaign," Rospars told me. "One is lowering the barriers to entry and making it as easy as possible for folks who come to our Web site. The other is raising the expectation of what it means to be a supporter. It's not enough to have a bumper sticker. We want you to give five dollars, make some calls, host an event. If you look at the messages we send to people over time, there's a presumption that they will organize."

The true killer app on My.BarackObama.com is the suite of fund-raising tools. You can, of course, click on a button and make a donation, or you can sign up for the subscription model, as thousands already have, and donate a little every month. You can set up your own page, establish your target number, pound your friends into submission with e-mails to pony up, and watch your personal fund-raising "thermometer" rise. "The idea," Rospars says, "is to give them the tools and have them go out and do all this on their own." The organizing principle behind Obama's Web site, in other words, is the approach Mark Gorenberg used with such success—only scaled to such a degree that it has created an army of more than a million donors and raisers. The Clinton campaign belatedly sought to mimic Obama's Internet success, and has raised what in any other context would be considered significant money online—but nothing like Obama's totals, in dollars or donors. John McCain's online fund-raising has been abysmal.

The social-networking model provided Obama with something that insurgents before him, from Gary Hart to McCain, always lacked: a means of capturing excitement and translating it into money. In the 2004 primary, Howard Dean raised \$27 million online. Obama is fast approaching \$200 million.

At a critical point in the race, this money had a dispositional effect. After "Super Tuesday," on February 5, Clinton's campaign ran out of money—a scenario that would have been unimaginable a year earlier. Obama, flush with cash, proceeded to win the next 11 contests, all but putting the nomination out of Clinton's reach.

"What's amazing," says Peter Leyden of the New Politics Institute, "is that Hillary built the best campaign that has ever been done in Democratic politics on the old model—she raised more money than anyone before her, she locked down all the party stalwarts, she assembled an all-star team of consultants, and she really mastered this top-down, command-and-control type of outfit. And yet, she's getting beaten by this political start-up that is essentially a totally different model of the new politics."

Before leaving Silicon Valley, I stopped by the local Obama headquarters. It was a Friday morning in early March, and the circus had passed through town more than a month earlier, after Obama lost the California primary by nine points. Yet his headquarters was not only open but jammed with volunteers. Soon after I arrived, everyone gathered around a speakerphone, and Obama himself, between votes on the Senate floor, gave a brief hortatory speech telling volunteers to call wavering Edwards delegates in Iowa before the county conventions that Saturday (they took place two months after the presidential caucuses). Afterward, people headed off to rows of computers, put on telephone headsets, and began punching up phone numbers on the Web site, ringing a desk bell after every successful call. The next day, Obama gained nine delegates, including a Clinton delegate.

The most striking thing about all this was that the headquarters is entirely self-sufficient—not a dime has come from the Obama campaign. Instead, everything from the computers to the telephones to the doughnuts and coffee—even the building's rent and utilities—is user-generated, arranged and paid for by local volunteers. It is one of several such examples across the country, and no other campaign has put together anything that can match this level of self-sufficiency.

The alchemy of social networking and the presidential race has given Obama claim to some of the most fabulous numbers in politics: 750,000 active volunteers, 8,000 affinity groups, and 30,000 events. But the most important number, and the clue to how Obama's machine has transformed the contours of politics, is the number of people who have contributed to his campaign—particularly the flood of small donors. Much of Clinton's haul, and McCain's, too, has come from the sort of people accustomed to being wooed in the living room, and Obama initially relied on them, too. But while his rivals continued to depend on big givers, Obama gained more and more small donors, until they finally eclipsed the big ones altogether. In February, the Obama campaign reported that 94 percent of their donations came in increments of \$200 or less, versus 26 percent for Clinton and 13 percent for McCain. Obama's claim of 1,276,000 donors through March is so large that Clinton doesn't bother to compete; she stopped regularly providing her own number last year.

"If the typical Gore event was 20 people in a living room writing six-figure checks," Gorenberg told me, "and the Kerry event was 2,000 people in a hotel ballroom writing four-figure checks, this year for Obama we have stadium rallies of 20,000 people who pay absolutely nothing, and then go home and contribute a few dollars online." Obama himself shrewdly capitalizes on both the turnout and the connectivity of his stadium crowds by routinely asking them to hold up their cell phones and punch in a five-digit

number to text their contact information to the campaign—to win their commitment right there on the spot.

It's possible to track the network effects in the growing fund-raising numbers that seem to arrive in ever larger denominations: \$25 million ... \$30 million ... \$35 million ... in February, the staggering \$55 million—*nearly \$2 million a day*.

In a sense, Obama represents a triumph of campaign-finance reform. He has not, of course, gotten the money out of politics, as many proponents of reform may have wished, and he will likely forgo public financing if he becomes the nominee. But he has realized the reformers' other big goal of ending the system whereby a handful of rich donors control the political process. He has done this not by limiting money but by adding much, much more of it—democratizing the system by flooding it with so many new contributors that their combined effect dilutes the old guard to the point that it scarcely poses any threat. Gorenberg says he's still often asked who the biggest fund-raisers are. He replies that it is no longer possible to tell. "Any one of them could wind up being huge," he says, "because it no longer matters how big a check you can write; it matters how motivated you are to reach out to others."

There is some irony in the fact that the architect of the most recent campaign-finance law also happens to be the Republican presidential nominee. John McCain likely

views all that has happened with considerable trepidation. Contrary to the widespread assumption at the time the McCain-Feingold Act became law (*The Atlantic* published an article on the legislation titled "The Democratic Party Suicide Bill"), it has not hurt the Democratic Party. Neither has it clearly benefited Republicans; McCain in particular has little to show for it. He raised \$15 million in March, only \$4 million of it over the Internet. His small-donor base is virtually nonexistent. When challenged about his staunch support for the Iraq War, McCain likes to say that he'd be willing to sacrifice the White House for principle. Nobody asks about campaign-finance reform. But that, and not Iraq, may wind up being the principled stand that does him in.

Meanwhile, the Obama machine rolls on, to the delight of its early stakeholders. "They've gone from zero to 700 employees in a year and raised \$200 million," Steve Spinner says of the campaign. "That's a super-high-growth, fast-charging operation."

It's also one whose growth curve is coming into sharper focus. The Obama campaign has not yet assumed a place in Silicon Valley lore alongside Apple, Google, and Facebook. But a few more months could change that. The hottest start-up in the Valley right now won't make anybody rich, but it might put the next president in the White House. ■

Joshua Green is an *Atlantic* senior editor.

THE INTERNET PRESIDENCY

How would Obama's success in online campaigning translate into governing?

HisSpace

BY MARC AMBINDER

America's politics have regularly been transformed by sudden changes in the way we communicate. And revolutions in communications technology have always bestowed great gifts on those politicians savvy enough to grasp their full potential. It is still unclear how far Barack Obama's talent for online campaigning will take him. But it's worth noting that some of the best-known presidents in U.S. history have stood at the vanguard of past communications revolutions—and that a few have used those revolutions not only to mobilize voters and

reach the White House but also to consolidate power and change the direction of politics once they got there.

Improvements to the printing press helped Andrew Jackson form and organize the Democratic Party, and he courted newspaper editors and publishers, some of whom became members of his Cabinet, with a zeal then unknown among political leaders. But the postal service, which was coming into its own as he reached for the presidency, was perhaps even more important to his election and public image. Jackson's exploits in the War of 1812



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became well known thanks in large measure to the distribution network that the postal service had created, and his 1828 campaign—among the first to distribute biographical pamphlets by mail—reinforced his heroic image. As president, he turned the office of postmaster into a patronage position, expanded the postal network further—the historian Richard John has pointed out that by the middle of Jackson's first term, there were 2,000 more postal workers in America than soldiers in the Army—and used it to keep his populist base rallied behind him.

Abraham Lincoln became a national celebrity, according to the historian Allen Guelzo's new book, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America*, when transcripts of those debates were reprinted nationwide in newspapers, which were just then reaching critical mass in distribution beyond the few Eastern cities where they had previously flourished. Newspapers enabled Lincoln, an odd-looking man with a reed-thin voice, to become a viable national candidate; it might even be argued that the idea of a "union" worth fighting for was conceivable because newspapers also enabled increasingly far-flung citizens to stay apprised of far-off events, and to envision themselves as part of a greater whole.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt used radio to make his case for a dramatic redefinition of government itself, quickly mastering the informal tone best suited to the medium. In his fireside chats, Roosevelt reached directly into American living rooms at pivotal moments of his presidency. His talks—which by turns soothed, educated, and pressed for change—held the New Deal together.

And of course John F. Kennedy famously rode into the White House thanks in part to the first televised presidential debate in U.S. history, in which his keen sense of the medium's visual impact, plus a little makeup, enabled him to fashion the look of a winner (especially when compared with a pale and haggard Richard Nixon). Kennedy used TV primarily to create and maintain his public image, not as a governing tool, but he understood its strengths and limitations before his peers did, and his election and popularity resulted partly from that understanding.

The communications revolution under way today involves the Internet, of course, and if Barack Obama eventually wins the presidency, it will be in no small part because he has understood the medium more fully than his opponents do. His speeches play well on YouTube, which allows for more than the five-second sound bites that have characterized the television era. And he recognizes the importance of transparency and consistency at a time when access to everything a politician has ever said is at the fingertips of every voter. But as Joshua Green notes in the preceding pages, Obama has truly set himself apart by his campaign's use of the

Internet to organize support. No other candidate in this or any other election has ever built a support network like Obama's. The campaign's 8,000 Web-based affinity groups, 750,000 active volunteers, and 1,276,000 donors have provided him with an enormous financial and organizational advantage in the Democratic primary.

Obama clearly intends to use the Web, if he is elected president, to transform governance just as he has transformed campaigning. Notably, he has spoken of conducting "online fireside chats" as president. And when one imagines how Obama's political army, presumably intact, might be mobilized to lobby for major legislation with just a few keystrokes, it becomes possible, for a moment at least, to imagine that he might change the political culture of Washington simply by overwhelming it.

What Obama seems to promise is, at its outer limits, a participatory democracy in which the opportunities for participation have been radically expanded. He proposes creating a public, Google-like database of every federal dollar spent. He aims to post every piece of non-emergency legislation online for five days before he signs it so that Americans can comment. A White House blog—also with comments—would be a near certainty. Overseeing this new apparatus would be a chief technology officer.

There is some precedent for Obama's vision. The British government has already used the Web to try to increase interaction with its citizenry, to limited effect. In November 2006, it established a Web site for citizens seeking redress from their government, <http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/>. More than 29,000 petitions have since been submitted, and about 9.5 percent of Britons have signed at least one of them. The petitions range from the class-conscious ("Order a independent report to identify reasons that the living conditions of working class people are poor in relation to higher classes") to the parochial ("We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to re-open sunderland ice rink").

What does the government do with the petitions? It says it reads them and directs them, at its discretion, to the appropriate department; sometimes the department responds. Advocates of the system note that it enables the government to monitor public wants and attitudes in a way that opinion polling doesn't.

Those in Obama's campaign who think about technology and government see the U.K. site as merely a baby step—the first of many ways that Americans might interact with a President Obama. But the British example also helps show the limits of online participatory government. Communication and transparency are virtues only up to a point; as students of bureaucracies know, both eventually become an enemy to efficiency. Moreover, if an Obama presidency invited more input than it could reasonably weigh and respond to, it would quickly squander the networking capital that the campaign has built.

Today Obama is like a brand, his campaign like a \$250 million company, and the voters like customers; the persuasion flows one way. If he becomes president, then power, authority, and legitimacy will flow in both directions; voters who are now keen to support the idea of Obama may push against his initiatives in office, sometimes unpredictably.

Indeed, in recent years the Web has without question generated and focused enough public pressure to force the hands of politicians on several occasions. So far, though, this pressure has been created spontaneously—and it has worked to the distinct disadvantage of the executive branch.

When President Bush nominated his longtime friend Harriet Miers to be a Supreme Court justice, wired conservative activists revolted. Minutes after the news broke, a blogger searched the federal campaign database and found that Miers had contributed to Democrats in the past, provoking a wave of questions about her ideological bona fides. In the space of a few hours, conservative outrage coalesced, and activists succeeded in throwing an unprepared White House and Republican National Committee off message; talk radio, the ether of the conservative movement, was filled with confusion, sown by angry e-mails and phone calls. I remember a senior GOP official asking me that night, “What the hell just happened?” It would take the RNC many hours to figure out that bloggers were generating the heat, and that bloggers had to be tended to first if the fire was to be put out.

More recently, the “netroots”—liberal Democrats organized online—have kept pressure on Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to avoid compromise with Republicans on national-security legislation the president calls critical. They’ve organized online petitions and sent e-mails to key staff members; they’ve raised money to air issue-advocacy ads. The Daily Kos Web site regularly asks its millions of readers to evaluate the performance of their congressional leaders, and, just as regularly, members of those leaders’ staffs check to see whether their bosses have had a good or a bad month.

Top Democrats are relying more and more on netroots money to fund their political action committees, so these evaluations matter.

The lesson here seems obvious enough: technology has concentrated a fair amount of political power in hubs outside Washington. But Washington has not harnessed that power successfully.



If Obama wins, and if he can harness the Web as a unifying force once the voting is done, he could be a powerful president indeed—the kind that might even deliver on some of the audacious promises that Obama the candidate has made. But the Web, like the politics it seeks to transform, is unruly and fickle. The online networks that have turbocharged Obama’s candidacy could end up hemming him in, and even stalling his agenda, as president. ■

Marc Ambinder is an Atlantic associate editor. He blogs at marcambinder.theatlantic.com.

The idea that a university education is for everyone is a destructive myth. An instructor at a “college of last resort” explains why.

BY PROFESSOR X

Illustration by Marcellus Hall

In the Basement of the Ivory Tower

I work part-time in the evenings as an adjunct instructor of English. I teach two courses, Introduction to College Writing (English 101) and Introduction to College Literature (English 102), at a small private college and at a community college. The campuses are physically lovely—quiet havens of ornate stonework and columns, Gothic Revival archways, sweeping quads, and tidy Victorian scalloping. Students chat or examine their cell phones or study languidly under spreading trees. Balls click faintly against »



bats on the athletic fields. Inside the arts and humanities building, my students and I discuss Shakespeare, *Dubliners*, poetic rhythms, and Edward Said. We might seem, at first glance, to be enacting some sort of college idyll. We could be at Harvard. But this is not Harvard, and our classes are no idyll. Beneath the surface of this serene and scholarly mise-en-scène roil waters of frustration and bad feeling, for these colleges teem with students who are in over their heads.

I work at colleges of last resort. For many of my students, college was not a goal they spent years preparing for, but a place they landed in. Those I teach don't come up in the debates about adolescent overachievers and cutthroat college admissions. Mine are the students whose applications show indifferent grades and have blank spaces where the extracurricular activities would go. They chose their college based not on the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings but on MapQuest; in their ideal academic geometry, college is located at a convenient spot between work and home. I can relate, for it was exactly this line of thinking that dictated where I sent my teaching résumé.

Some of their high-school transcripts are newly minted, others decades old. Many of my students have returned to college after some manner of life interregnum: a year or two of post-high-school dissolution, or a large swath of simple middle-class existence, 20 years of the demands of home and family. They work during the day and come to class in the evenings. I teach young men who must amass a certain number of credits before they can become police officers or state troopers, lower-echelon health-care workers who need credits to qualify for raises, and municipal employees who require college-level certification to advance at work.

My students take English 101 and English 102 not because they want to but because they must. Both colleges I teach at require that all students, no matter what their majors or career objectives, pass these two courses. For many of my students, this is difficult. Some of the young guys, the police-officers-to-be, have wonderfully open faces across which play their every passing emotion, and when we start reading "Araby" or "Barn Burning," their boredom quickly becomes apparent. They fidget; they prop their

heads on their arms; they yawn and sometimes appear to grimace in pain, as though they had been tasered. Their eyes implore: *How could you do this to me?*

The goal of English 101 is to instruct students in the sort of expository writing that theoretically will be required across the curriculum. My students must venture the compare-and-contrast paper, the argument paper, the process-analysis paper (which explains how some action is performed—as a lab report might), and the dreaded research paper, complete with parenthetical citations and a listing of works cited, all in Modern Language Association format. In 102, we read short stories, poetry, and *Hamlet*, and we take several stabs at the only writing more dreaded than the research paper: the absolutely despised Writing About Literature.

Class time passes in a flash—for me, anyway, if not always for my students. I love trying to convey to a class my passion for literature, or the immense satisfaction a

Our textbook boils effective writing down to a series of steps. It devotes pages and pages to the composition of a compare-and-contrast essay, with lots of examples and tips and checklists. “Develop a plan of organization and stick to it,” the text chirrups not so helpfully. Of course any student who can, does, and does so automatically, without the textbook’s directive. For others, this seems an impossible task. Over the course of 15 weeks, some of my best writers improve a little. Sometimes my worst writers improve too, though they rarely, if ever, approach base-level competence.

How I envy professors in other disciplines! How appealing seems the straightforwardness of their task! *These are the properties of a cell membrane, kid. Memorize ‘em, and be ready to spit ‘em back at me.* The biology teacher also enjoys the psychic ease of grading multiple-choice tests. Answers are right or wrong. The grades cannot be questioned. Quantifying the value of a piece

No one is thinking about the larger implications,
let alone the morality, of admitting so many students to
classes they cannot possibly pass.

writer can feel when he or she nails a point. When I am at my best, and the students are in an attentive mood—generally, early in the semester—the room crackles with positive energy. Even the cops-to-be feel driven to succeed in the class, to read and love the great books, to explore potent themes, to write well.

The bursting of our collective bubble comes quickly. A few weeks into the semester, the students must start actually writing papers, and I must start grading them. Despite my enthusiasm, despite their thoughtful nods of agreement and what I have interpreted as moments of clarity, it turns out that in many cases it has all come to naught.

Remarkably few of my students can do well in these classes. Students routinely fail; some fail multiple times, and some will never pass, because they cannot write a coherent sentence.

In each of my courses, we discuss thesis statements and topic sentences, the need for precision in vocabulary, why economy of language is desirable, what constitutes a compelling subject. I explain, I give examples, I cheerlead, I cajole, but each evening, when the class is over and I come down from my teaching high, I inevitably lose faith in the task, as I’m sure my students do. I envision the lot of us driving home, solitary scholars in our cars, growing sadder by the mile.

of writing, however, is intensely subjective, and English teachers are burdened with discretion. (My students seem to believe that my discretion is limitless. Some of them come to me at the conclusion of a course and matter-of-factly ask that I change a failing grade because they need to graduate this semester or because they worked really hard in the class or because they need to pass in order to receive tuition reimbursement from their employer.)

I wonder, sometimes, at the conclusion of a course, when I fail nine out of 15 students, whether the college will send me a note either (1) informing me of a serious bottleneck in the march toward commencement and demanding that I pass more students, or (2) commending me on my fiscal ingenuity—my high failure rate forces students to pay for classes two or three times over.

What actually happens is that nothing happens. I feel no pressure from the colleges in either direction. My department chairpersons, on those rare occasions when I see them, are friendly, even warm. They don’t mention all those students who have failed my courses, and I don’t bring them up. There seems, as is often the case in colleges, to be a huge gulf between academia and reality. No one is thinking about the larger implications, let alone the morality, of admitting so many students to classes they cannot possibly pass. The colleges and the students and I are bobbing up and down in a great wave of societal forces—social optimism on a large scale, the sense

of college as both a universal right and a need, financial necessity on the part of the colleges and the students alike, the desire to maintain high academic standards while admitting marginal students—that have coalesced into a mini-tsunami of difficulty. No one has drawn up the flow-chart and seen that, although more-widespread college admission is a bonanza for the colleges and nice for the students and makes the entire United States of America feel rather pleased with itself, there is one point of irreconcilable conflict in the system, and that is the moment when the adjunct instructor, who by the nature of his job teaches the worst students, must ink the *F* on that first writing assignment.

Recently, I gave a student a failing grade on her research paper. She was a woman in her 40s; I will call her Ms. L. She looked at her paper, and my comments, and the grade. “I can’t believe it,” she said softly. “I was so proud of myself for having written a college paper.”

From the beginning of our association vis-à-vis the research paper, I knew that there would be trouble with Ms. L.

When I give out this assignment, I usually bring the class to the college library for a lesson on Internet-based research. I ask them about their computer skills, and some say they have none, fessing up to being computer illiterate and saying, timorously, how hopeless they are at that sort of thing. It often turns out, though, that many of them have at least sent and received e-mail and Googled their neighbors, and it doesn’t take me long to demonstrate how to search for journal articles in such databases as Academic Search Premier and JSTOR.

Ms. L., it was clear to me, had never been on the Internet. She quite possibly had never sat in front of a computer. The concept of a link was news to her. She didn’t know that if something was blue and underlined, you could click on it. She was preserved in the amber of 1990, struggling with the basic syntax of the World Wide Web. She peered intently at the screen and chewed a fingernail. She was flummoxed.

I had responsibilities to the rest of my students, so only when the class ended could I sit with her and work on some of the basics. It didn’t go well. She wasn’t absorbing anything. The wall had gone up, the wall known to every teacher at every level: the wall of defeat and hopelessness and humiliation, the wall that is an impenetrable barrier to learning. She wasn’t hearing a word I said.

“You might want to get some extra help,” I told her. “You can schedule a private session with the librarian.”

“I’ll get it,” she said. “I just need a little time.”

“You have some computer-skills deficits,” I told her. “You should address them as soon as you can.” I don’t have cause to use much educational jargon, but *deficits* has often come in handy. It conveys the seriousness of the

situation, the student’s jaw-dropping lack of ability, without being judgmental. I tried to jostle her along. “You should schedule that appointment right now. The librarian is at the desk.”

“I realize I have a lot of work to do,” she said.

Our dialogue had turned oblique, as though we now inhabited a Pinter play.

The research-paper assignment is meant to teach the fundamental mechanics of the thing: how to find sources, summarize or quote them, and cite them, all the while not plagiarizing. Students must develop a strong thesis, not just write what is called a “passive report,” the sort of thing one knocks out in fifth grade on Thomas Edison. This time around, the students were to elucidate the positions of scholars on two sides of a historical controversy. Why did Truman remove MacArthur? Did the United States covertly support the construction of the Berlin Wall? What really happened in the Gulf of Tonkin? Their job in the paper, as I explained it, was to take my arm and introduce me as a stranger to scholars A, B, and C, who stood on one side of the issue, and to scholars D, E, and F, who were firmly on the other—as though they were hosting a party.

A future state trooper snorted. “That’s some dull party,” he said.

At our next meeting after class in the library, Ms. L. asked me whether she could do her paper on abortion. What exactly, I asked, was the historical controversy? Well, she replied, whether it should be allowed. She was stuck, I realized, in the well-worn groove of assignments she had done in high school. I told her that I thought the abortion question was more of an ethical dilemma than a historical controversy.

“I’ll have to figure it all out,” she said.

She switched her topic a half-dozen times; perhaps it would be fairer to say that she never really came up with one. I wondered whether I should just give her one, then decided against it. Devising a topic was part of the assignment.

“What about gun control?” she asked.

I sighed. You could write, I told her, about a particular piece of firearms-related legislation. Historians might disagree, I said, about certain aspects of the bill’s drafting. Remember, though, the paper must be grounded in history. It could not be a discussion of the pros and cons of gun control.

“All right,” she said softly.

Needless to say, the paper she turned in was a discussion of the pros and cons of gun control. At least, I think that was the subject. There was no real thesis. The paper often lapsed into incoherence. Sentences broke off in the middle of a line and resumed on the next one, with the first word inappropriately capitalized. There was some wavering between single- and double-spacing. She did quote articles, but cited only databases—where were the

journals themselves? The paper was also too short: a bad job, and such small portions.

"I can't believe it," she said when she received her *F*. "I was so proud of myself for having written a college paper."

She most certainly hadn't written a college paper, and she was a long way from doing so. Yet there she was in college, paying lots of tuition for the privilege of pursuing a degree, which she very likely needed to advance at work. Her deficits don't make her a bad person or even unintelligent or unusual. Many people cannot write a research paper, and few have to do so in their workaday life. But let's be frank: she wasn't working at anything resembling a college level.

I gave Ms. L. the *F* and slept poorly that night. Some of the failing grades I issue gnaw at me more than others. In my ears rang her plaintive words, so emblematic of the tough spot in which we both now found ourselves. Ms. L. had done everything that American culture asked of her. She had gone back to school to better herself, and she

ones who attend class during daylight hours, tend to be younger than mine. Many of them are in school on their parents' dime. Professors can fail these young people with emotional impunity because many such failures are the students' own fault: too much time spent texting, too little time with the textbooks.

But my students and I are of a piece. I could not be aloof, even if I wanted to be. Our presence together in these evening classes is evidence that we all have screwed up. I'm working a second job; they're trying desperately to get to a place where they don't have to. All any of us wants is a free evening. Many of my students are in the vicinity of my own age. Whatever our chronological ages, we are all adults, by which I mean thoroughly saddled with children and mortgages and sputtering careers. We all show up for class exhausted from working our full-time jobs. We carry knapsacks and briefcases overspilling with the contents of our hectic lives. We smell of the food we have eaten that day, and of the food we carry with us for

I subscribe to the American ideal; unfortunately, it is with me and my red pen that that ideal crashes and burns.

expected to be rewarded for it, not slapped down. She had failed not, as some students do, by being absent too often or by blowing off assignments. She simply was not qualified for college. *What exactly*, I wondered, *was I grading?* I thought briefly of passing Ms. L., of slipping her the old gentlewoman's C-minus. But I couldn't do it. It wouldn't be fair to the other students. By passing Ms. L., I would be eroding the standards of the school for which I worked. Besides, I nurse a healthy ration of paranoia. What if she were a plant from *The New York Times* doing a story on the declining standards of the nation's colleges? In my mind's eye, the front page of a newspaper spun madly, as in old movies, coming to rest to reveal a damning headline:

THIS IS A C?

Illiterate Mess Garners 'Average' Grade

Adjunct Says Student 'Needed' to Pass, 'Tried Hard'

No, I would adhere to academic standards, and keep myself off the front page.

We think of college professors as being profoundly indifferent to the grades they hand out. My own professors were fairly haughty and aloof, showing little concern for the petty worries, grades in particular, of their students. There was an enormous distance between students and professors. The full-time, tenured professors at the colleges where I teach may likewise feel comfortably separated from those whom they instruct. Their students, the

the evening. We reek of coffee and tuna oil. The rooms in which we study have been used all day, and are filthy. Candy wrappers litter the aisles. We pile our trash daintily atop filled garbage cans.

During breaks, my students scatter to various corners and niches of the building, whip out their cell phones, and try to maintain a home life. Burdened with their own assignments, they gamely try to stay on top of their children's. *Which problems do you have to do? ... That's not too many. Finish that and then do the spelling... No, you can't watch Grey's Anatomy.*

Adult education, nontraditional education, education for returning students—whatever you want to call it—is a substantial profit center for many colleges. Like factory owners, school administrators are delighted with this idea of mounting a second shift of learning in their classrooms, in the evenings, when the full-time students are busy with such regular extracurricular pursuits of higher education as reading Facebook and playing beer pong. If colleges could find a way to mount a third, graveyard shift, as Henry Ford's Willow Run did at the height of the Second World War, I believe that they would.

There is a sense that the American workforce needs to be more professional at every level. Many jobs that never before required college now call for at least some post-secondary course work. School custodians, those who run the boilers and spread synthetic sawdust on vomit, may

not need college—but the people who supervise them, who decide which brand of synthetic sawdust to procure, probably do. There is a sense that our bank tellers should be college educated, and so should our medical-billing techs, and our child-welfare officers, and our sheriffs and federal marshals. We want the police officer who stops the car with the broken taillight to have a nodding acquaintance with great literature. And when all is said and done, my personal economic interest in booming college enrollments aside, I don't think that's such a boneheaded idea. Reading literature at the college level is a route to spacious thinking, to an acquaintance with certain profound ideas, that is of value to anyone. Will having read *Invisible Man* make a police officer less likely to indulge in racial profiling? Will a familiarity with Steinbeck make him more sympathetic to the plight of the poor, so that he might understand the lives of those who simply *cannot* get their taillights fixed? Will it benefit the correctional officer to have read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*? The health-care worker *Arrowsmith*? Should the child-welfare officer read Plath's "Daddy"? Such one-to-one correspondences probably don't hold. But although I may be biased, being an English instructor and all, I can't shake the sense that reading literature is informative and broadening and ultimately good for you. If I should fall ill, I suppose I would rather the hospital billing staff had read *The Pickwick Papers*, particularly the parts set in debtors' prison.

America, ever-idealistic, seems wary of the vocational-education track. We are not comfortable limiting anyone's options. Telling someone that college is not for him seems harsh and classist and British, as though we were sentencing him to a life in the coal mines. I sympathize with this stance; I subscribe to the American ideal. Unfortunately, it is with me and my red pen that that ideal crashes and burns.

Sending everyone under the sun to college is a noble initiative. Academia is all for it, naturally. Industry is all for it; some companies even help with tuition costs. Government is all for it; the truly needy have lots of opportunities for financial aid. The media applauds it—try to imagine someone speaking out against the idea. To oppose such a scheme of inclusion would be positively churlish. But one piece of the puzzle hasn't been figured into the equation, to use the sort of phrase I encounter in the papers submitted by my English 101 students. The zeitgeist of academic possibility is a great inverted pyramid, and its rather sharp point is poking, uncomfortably, a spot just about midway between my shoulder blades.

For I, who teach these low-level, must-pass, no-multiple-choice-test classes, am the one who ultimately delivers the news to those unfit for college: that they lack the most-basic skills and have no sense of the volume of work required; that they are in some cases barely literate; that they are so bereft of schemata, so dispossessed of contexts

in which to place newly acquired knowledge, that every bit of information simply raises more questions. They are not ready for high school, some of them, much less for college.

I am the man who has to lower the hammer.

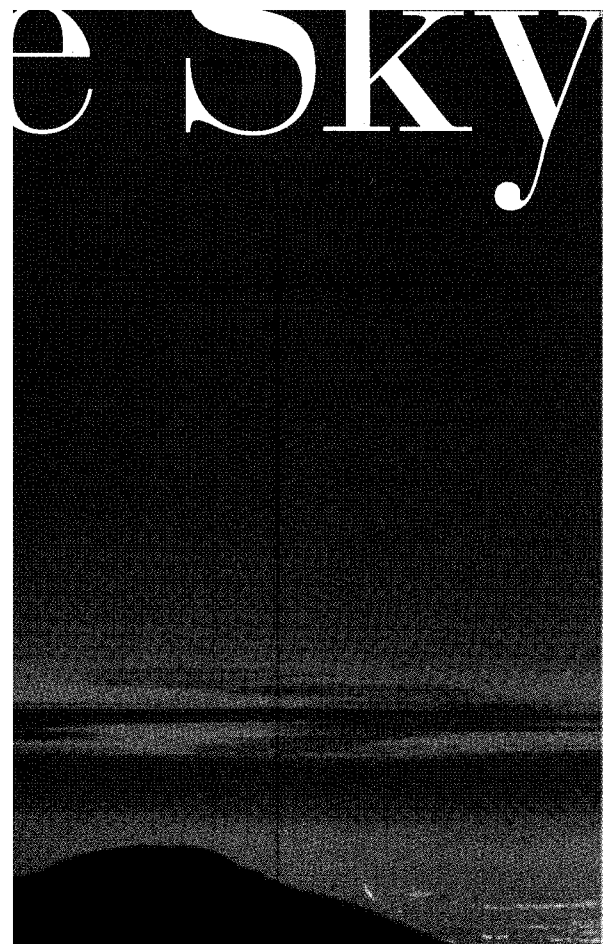
We may look mild-mannered, we adjunct instructors, but we are academic button men. I roam the halls of academe like a modern Coriolanus bearing sword and grade book, "a thing of blood, whose every motion / Was timed with dying cries."

I knew that Ms. L.'s paper would fail. I knew it that first night in the library. But I couldn't tell her that she wasn't ready for an introductory English class. I wouldn't be saving her from the humiliation of defeat by a class she simply couldn't handle. I'd be a sexist, ageist, intellectual snob.

In her own mind, Ms. L. had triumphed over adversity. In her own mind, she was a feel-good segment on *Oprah*. Everyone wants to triumph. But not everyone can—in fact, most can't. If they could, it wouldn't be any kind of a triumph at all. Never would I want to cheapen the accomplishments of those who really have conquered college, who were able to get past their deficits and earn a diploma, maybe even climbing onto the college honor roll. That is truly something.

One of the things I try to do on the first night of English 102 is relate the literary techniques we will study to novels that the students have already read. I try to find books familiar to everyone. This has so far proven impossible. My students don't read much, as a rule, and though I think of them monolithically, they don't really share a culture. *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Nope. (And I thought everyone had read that!) *Animal Farm*? No. If they have read it, they don't remember it. *The Outsiders*? *The Chocolate War*? No and no. *Charlotte's Web*? You'd think so, but no. So then I expand the exercise to general works of narrative art, meaning movies, but that doesn't work much better. Oddly, there are no movies that they all have seen—well, except for one. They've all seen *The Wizard of Oz*. Some have caught it multiple times. So we work with the old warhorse of a *quest narrative*. The farmhands' early conversation illustrates *foreshadowing*. The witch melts at the *climax*. *Theme*? Hands fly up. Everybody knows that one—perhaps all too well. Dorothy learns that she can do anything she puts her mind to and that all the tools she needs to succeed are already within her. I skip the *denouement*: the intellectually ambitious scarecrow proudly mangles the Pythagorean theorem and is awarded a questionable diploma in a dreamland far removed from reality. That's art holding up a mirror all too closely to our own poignant scholarly endeavors. ■

Professor X teaches at a private college and at a community college in the northeastern United States.



Is Falling

Breakthrough ideas have a way of seeming obvious in retrospect, and about a decade ago, a Columbia University geophysicist named Dallas Abbott had a breakthrough idea. She had been pondering the craters left by comets and asteroids that smashed into Earth. Geologists had counted them and concluded that space strikes are rare events and had occurred mainly during the era of primordial mists. But, Abbott realized, this deduction was based on the »

number of craters found on land—and because 70 percent of Earth's surface is water, wouldn't most space objects hit the sea? So she began searching for underwater craters caused by impacts rather than by other forces, such as volcanoes. What she has found is spine-chilling: evidence that several enormous asteroids or comets have slammed into our planet quite recently, in geologic terms. If Abbott is right, then you may be here today, reading this magazine, only because by sheer chance those objects struck the ocean rather than land.

Abbott believes that a space object about 300 meters in diameter hit the Gulf of Carpentaria, north of Australia, in 536 A.D. An object that size, striking at up to 50,000 miles per hour, could release as much energy as 1,000 nuclear bombs. Debris, dust, and gases thrown into the atmosphere by the impact would have blocked sunlight, temporarily cooling the planet—and indeed, contemporaneous accounts describe dim skies, cold summers, and poor harvests in 536 and 537. "A most dread portent took place," the Byzantine historian Procopius wrote of 536; the sun "gave forth its light without brightness." Frost reportedly covered China in the summertime. Still, the harm was mitigated by the ocean impact. When a space object strikes land, it kicks up more dust and debris, increasing the global-cooling effect; at the same time, the combination of shock waves and extreme heating at the point of impact generates nitric and nitrous acids, producing rain as corrosive as battery acid. If the Gulf of Carpentaria object were to strike Miami today, most of the city would be leveled, and the atmospheric effects could trigger crop failures around the world.

What's more, the Gulf of Carpentaria object was a skipping stone compared with an object that Abbott thinks whammed into the Indian Ocean near Madagascar some 4,800 years ago, or about 2,800 B.C. Researchers generally assume that a space object a kilometer or more across

would cause significant global harm: widespread destruction, severe acid rain, and dust storms that would darken the

world's skies for decades. The object that hit the Indian Ocean was three to five kilometers across, Abbott believes, and caused a tsunami in the Pacific 600 feet high—many times higher than the 2004 tsunami that struck Southeast Asia. Ancient texts such as Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh support her conjecture, describing an unspeakable planetary flood in roughly the same time period. If the Indian Ocean object were to hit the sea now, many of the world's coastal cities could be flattened. If it were to hit land, much of a continent would be leveled; years of winter and mass starvation would ensue.

At the start of her research, which has sparked much debate among specialists, Abbott reasoned that if colossal

asteroids or comets strike the sea with about the same frequency as they strike land, then given the number of known land craters, perhaps 100 large impact craters might lie beneath the oceans. In less than a decade of searching, she and a few colleagues have already found what appear to be 14 large underwater impact sites. That they've found so many so rapidly is hardly reassuring.

Other scientists are making equally unsettling discoveries. Only in the past few decades have astronomers begun to search the nearby skies for objects such as asteroids and comets (for convenience, let's call them "space rocks"). What they are finding suggests that near-Earth space rocks are more numerous than was once thought, and that their orbits may not be as stable as has been assumed. There is also reason to think that space rocks may not even need to reach Earth's surface to cause cataclysmic damage. Our solar system appears to be a far more dangerous place than was previously believed.

The received wisdom about the origins of the solar system goes something like this: the sun and planets formed about 4.5 billion years ago from a swirling nebula containing huge amounts of gas and dust, as well as relatively small amounts of metals and other dense substances released by ancient supernova explosions. The sun is at the center; the denser planets, including Earth, formed in the middle region, along with many asteroids—the small rocky bodies made of material that failed to incorporate into a planet. Farther out are the gas-giant planets, such as Jupiter, plus vast amounts of light elements, which formed comets on the boundary of the solar system. Early on, asteroids existed by the millions; the planets and their satellites were bombarded by constant, furious strikes. The heat and shock waves generated by these impacts regularly sterilized the young Earth. Only after the rain of space objects ceased could life begin; by then, most asteroids had already either hit something or found stable orbits that do not lead toward planets or moons. Asteroids still exist, but most were assumed to be in the asteroid belt, which lies between Mars and Jupiter, far from our blue world.

As for comets, conventional wisdom held that they also bombarded the planets during the early eons. Comets are mostly frozen water mixed with dirt. An ancient deluge of comets may have helped create our oceans; lots of comets hit the moon, too, but there the light elements they were composed of evaporated. As with asteroids, most comets were thought to have smashed into something long ago; and, because the solar system is largely void, researchers deemed it statistically improbable that those remaining would cross the paths of planets.

These standard assumptions—that remaining space rocks are few, and that encounters with planets were mainly confined to the past—are being upended. On March 18, 2004, for instance, a 30-meter asteroid designated

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For a video interview with Gregg Easterbrook about the threat of a comet or asteroid strike, visit www.theatlantic.com/rocks.

2004 FH—a hunk potentially large enough to obliterate a city—shot past Earth, not far above the orbit occupied by telecommunications satellites. (Enter “2004 FH” in the search box at Wikipedia and you can watch film of that asteroid passing through the night sky.) Looking at the broader picture, in 1992 the astronomers David Jewitt, of the University of Hawaii, and Jane Luu, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, discovered the Kuiper Belt, a region of asteroids and comets that starts near the orbit of Neptune and extends for immense distances outward. At least 1,000 objects big enough to be seen from Earth have already been located there. These objects are 100 kilometers across or larger, much bigger than whatever dispatched the dinosaurs; space rocks this size are referred to as “planet killers” because their impact would likely end life on Earth. Investigation of the Kuiper Belt has just begun, but there appear to be substantially more asteroids in this region than in the asteroid belt, which may need a new name.

Beyond the Kuiper Belt may lie the hypothesized Oort Cloud, thought to contain as many as trillions of comets. If the Oort Cloud does exist, the number of extant comets

to spot—they move rapidly, compared with the rest of the heavens, and even the nearby ones are fainter than other objects in space. Not until the 1980s did scientists begin systematically searching for asteroids near Earth. They have been finding them in disconcerting abundance.

In 1980, only 86 near-Earth asteroids and comets were known to exist. By 1990, the figure had risen to 170; by 2000, it was 921; as of this writing, it is 5,388. The Jet Propulsion Laboratory, part of NASA, keeps a running tally at www.neo.jpl.nasa.gov/stats. Ten years ago, 244 near-Earth space rocks one kilometer across or more—the size that would cause global calamity—were known to exist; now 741 are. Of the recently discovered nearby space objects, NASA has classified 186 as “impact risks” (details about these rocks are at www.neo.jpl.nasa.gov/risk). And because most space-rock searches to date have been low-budget affairs, conducted with equipment designed to look deep into the heavens, not at nearby space, the actual number of impact risks is undoubtedly much higher. Extrapolating from recent discoveries, NASA estimates that there are perhaps 20,000 potentially hazardous asteroids and comets in the general vicinity of Earth.

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is far greater than was once believed. Some astronomers now think that short-period comets, which swing past the sun frequently, hail from the relatively nearby Kuiper Belt, whereas comets whose return periods are longer originate in the Oort Cloud.

But if large numbers of comets and asteroids are still around, several billion years after the formation of the solar system, wouldn't they by now be in stable orbits—ones that rarely intersect those of the planets? Maybe not. During the past few decades, some astronomers have theorized that the movement of the solar system within the Milky Way varies the gravitational stresses to which the sun, and everything that revolves around it, is exposed. The solar system may periodically pass close to stars or groups of stars whose gravitational pull affects the Oort Cloud, shaking comets and asteroids loose from their orbital moorings and sending them downward, toward the inner planets.

Consider objects that are already near Earth, and the picture gets even bleaker. Astronomers traditionally spent little time looking for asteroids, regarding them as a lesser class of celestial bodies, lacking the beauty of comets or the significance of planets and stars. Plus, asteroids are hard

There's still more bad news. Earth has experienced several mass extinctions—the dinosaurs died about 65 million years ago, and something killed off some 96 percent of the world's marine species about 250 million years ago. Scientists have generally assumed that whatever caused those long-ago mass extinctions—comet impacts, extreme volcanic activity—arose from conditions that have changed and no longer pose much threat. It's a comforting notion—but what about the mass extinction that occurred close to our era?

About 12,000 years ago, many large animals of North America started disappearing—woolly mammoths, saber-toothed cats, mastodons, and others. Some scientists have speculated that Paleo-Indians may have hunted some of the creatures to extinction. A millennia-long mini-Ice Age also may have been a factor. But if that's the case, what explains the disappearance of the Clovis People, the best-documented Paleo-Indian culture, at about the same time? Their population stretched as far south as Mexico, so the mini-Ice Age probably was not solely responsible for their extinction.

A team of researchers led by Richard Firestone, of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, in California,

recently announced the discovery of evidence that one or two huge space rocks, each perhaps several kilometers across, exploded high above Canada 12,900 years ago. The detonation, they believe, caused widespread fires and dust clouds, and disrupted climate patterns so severely that it triggered a prolonged period of global cooling. Mammoths and other species might have been killed either by the impact itself or by starvation after their food supply was disrupted. These conclusions, though hotly disputed by other researchers, were based on extensive examinations of soil samples from across the continent; in strata from that era, scientists found widely distributed

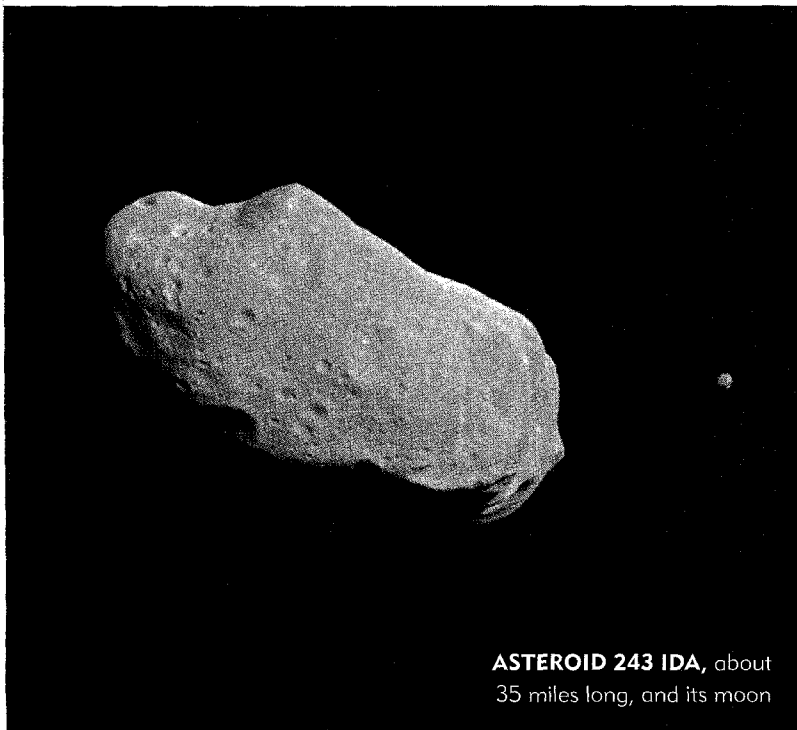
only 30 meters across. Right now, astronomers are nervously tracking 99942 Apophis, an asteroid with a slight chance of striking Earth in April 2036. Apophis is also small by asteroid standards, perhaps 300 meters across, but it could hit with about 60,000 times the force of the Hiroshima bomb—enough to destroy an area the size of France. In other words, small asteroids may be more dangerous than we used to think—and may do considerable damage even if they don't reach Earth's surface.

Until recently, nearly all the thinking about the risks of space-rock strikes has focused on counting craters. But what if most impacts don't leave craters? This is the prospect that troubles Boslough. Exploding in the air, the Tunguska rock did plenty of damage, but if people had not seen the flashes, heard the detonation, and traveled to the remote area to photograph the scorched, flattened wasteland, we'd never know the Tunguska event had happened. Perhaps a comet or two exploding above Canada 12,900 years ago spelled the end for saber-toothed cats and Clovis society. But no obvious crater resulted; clues to the calamity were subtle and hard to come by.

Comets, asteroids, and the little meteors that form pleasant shooting stars approach Earth at great speeds—at least 25,000 miles per hour. As they enter the atmosphere they heat up, from friction, and compress, because they decelerate rapidly. Many space rocks explode under this stress, especially small ones; large objects are more likely to reach Earth's surface. The angle at which objects enter the atmosphere also matters: an asteroid or comet approaching straight down has a better chance of hitting the surface than one entering the atmosphere at a shallow angle, as the latter would have to plow through more air, heating up and compressing as it descended. The object or objects that may have detonated above Canada 12,900 years ago would probably have approached at a shallow angle.

If, as Boslough thinks, most asteroids and comets explode before reaching the ground, then this is another reason to fear that the conventional thinking seriously underestimates the frequency of space-rock strikes—the small number of craters may be lulling us into complacency. After all, if a space rock were hurtling toward a city, whether it would leave a crater would not be the issue—the explosion would be the issue.

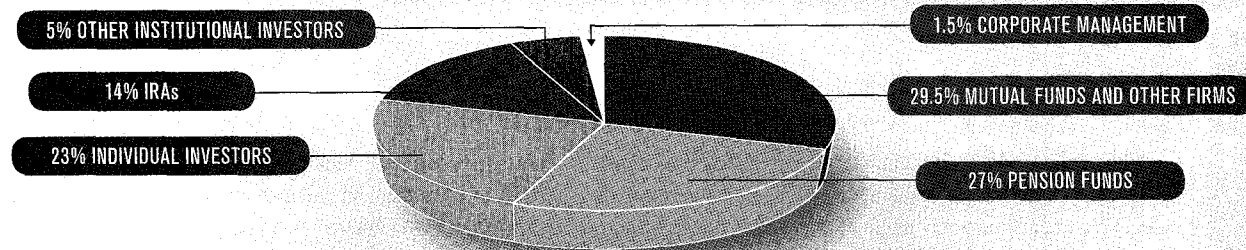
A generation ago, the standard assumption was that a dangerous object would strike Earth perhaps once in a million years. By the mid-1990s, researchers began to say that the threat was greater: perhaps a strike every 300,000 years. This winter, I asked William Ailor, an asteroid specialist at The Aerospace Corporation, a think tank for the Air Force, what he thought the risk was. Ailor's answer: a one-in-10 chance per century of a dangerous space-object strike.



ASTEROID 243 IDA, about
35 miles long, and its moon

soot and also magnetic grains of iridium, an element that is rare on Earth but common in space. Iridium is the meteor-hunter's lodestar: the discovery of iridium dating back 65 million years is what started the geologist Walter Alvarez on his path-breaking theory about the dinosaurs' demise.

A more recent event gives further cause for concern. As buffs of the television show *The X Files* will recall, just a century ago, in 1908, a huge explosion occurred above Tunguska, Siberia. The cause was not a malfunctioning alien star-cruiser but a small asteroid or comet that detonated as it approached the ground. The blast had hundreds of times the force of the Hiroshima bomb and devastated an area of several hundred square miles. Had the explosion occurred above London or Paris, the city would no longer exist. Mark Boslough, a researcher at the Sandia National Laboratory, in New Mexico, recently concluded that the Tunguska object was surprisingly small, perhaps



U.S. Oil and Natural Gas Company Ownership, 2007

Do you own an oil company?

If you've ever wondered who owns America's oil and natural gas companies, chances are the answer is, "you do."

Surprised?

The fact is that if you have a mutual fund account – and 55 million American households, with a median income of under \$70,000, do – there's a good chance it invests in oil and natural gas company stocks. If you have an IRA or personal retirement account – and 45 million U.S. households do – there is a good chance it invests in energy stocks.

All this comes from a recent study* of U.S. oil and natural gas company ownership headed by Robert J. Shapiro, undersecretary of commerce for economic affairs under President Bill Clinton.

According to the study, the majority of the industry's shareholders are "middle-class U.S. households with mutual fund investments, pension accounts, other personal retirement accounts, and small personal portfolios."

What many may find particularly surprising is that our industry's corporate management owns only a tiny fraction of company shares.

Specifically, here is what the

study found:

- 29.5 percent of U.S. oil and natural gas company shares are owned by mutual funds and other firms
- 27 percent are owned by pension funds
- Individual investors own 23 percent
- 14 percent are held in IRA accounts
- 5 percent are owned by other institutional investors
- 1.5 percent are held by corporate management (significantly less in the largest companies)

These findings tell us something very important: tens of millions of Americans have a stake in the U.S. oil and natural gas industry. When the industry's earnings are strong, the real winners are middle-class Americans, people investing in their retirement security or saving for their children's college education.

So when the political rhetoric gets hot about increasing energy taxes or taking "excess profits" from U.S. oil companies, it is important to step back, look at the facts, and ask yourself, "who does that really hurt?"

To read the full study, visit EnergyTomorrow.org.

THE *people* OF AMERICA'S
OIL AND NATURAL GAS INDUSTRY

*SONECON: The Distribution of Ownership of U.S. Oil and Natural Gas Companies, September 2007

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Tens of millions of Americans own a piece of the U.S. oil and natural gas industry

Regardless of which estimate is correct, the likelihood of an event is, of course, no predictor. Even if space strikes are *likely* only once every million years, that doesn't mean a million years will pass before the next impact—the sky could suddenly darken tomorrow. Equally important, improbable but cataclysmic dangers ought to command attention because of their scope. A tornado is far more likely than an asteroid strike, but humanity is sure to survive the former. The chances that any one person will die in an airline crash are minute, but this does not prevent us from caring about aviation safety. And as Nathan Myhrvold, the former chief technology officer of Microsoft, put it, “The odds of a space-object strike during your lifetime may be no more than the odds you will die in a plane crash—but with space rocks, it's like the entire human race is riding on the plane.”

Given the scientific findings, shouldn't space rocks be one of NASA's priorities? You'd think so, but Dallas Abbott says NASA has shown no interest in her group's work: “The NASA people don't want to believe me. They won't even listen.”

NASA supports some astronomy to search for near-Earth objects, but the agency's efforts have been piecemeal and underfunded, backed by less than a tenth of

in an approaching-rock emergency. Goals that *were* listed included “sustained human presence on the moon for national preeminence” and “extend the human presence across the solar system and beyond.” Achieving national preeminence— isn't the United States pretty well-known already? As for extending our presence, a manned mission to Mars is at least decades away, and human travel to the outer planets is not seriously discussed by even the most zealous advocates of space exploration. Sending people “beyond” the solar system is inconceivable with any technology that can reasonably be foreseen; an interstellar spaceship traveling at the fastest speed ever achieved in space flight would take 60,000 years to reach the next-closest star system.

After the presentation, NASA's administrator, Michael Griffin, came into the room. I asked him why there had been no discussion of space rocks. He said, “We don't make up our goals. Congress has not instructed us to provide Earth defense. I administer the policy set by Congress and the White House, and that policy calls for a focus on return to the moon. Congress and the White House do not ask me what I think.” I asked what NASA's priorities would be if he did set the goals. “The same. Our priorities are correct now,” he answered. “We are on the right path. We need to go back to the moon. We don't need a

‘Are we going to let a space strike kill millions
of people before we get serious about this?’
asks Russell Schweickart, one of the *Apollo* astronauts.

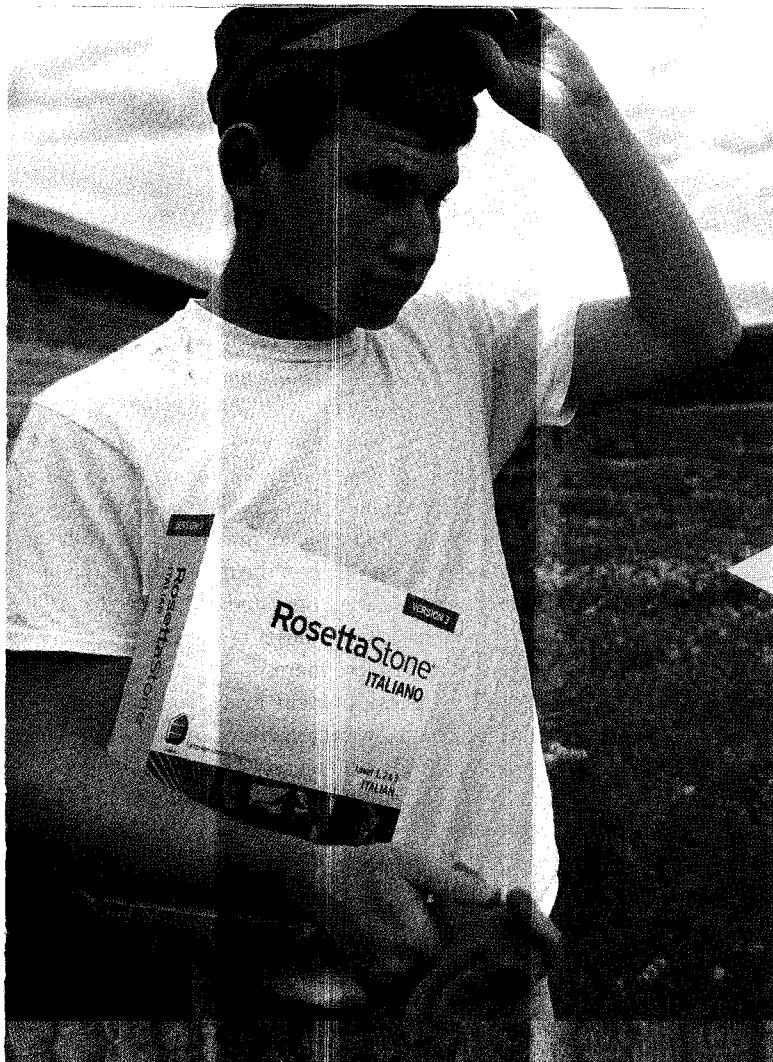
a percent of the NASA budget. And though altering the course of space objects approaching Earth appears technically feasible, NASA possesses no hardware specifically for this purpose, has nearly nothing in development, and has resisted calls to begin work on protection against space strikes. Instead, NASA is enthusiastically preparing to spend hundreds of billions of taxpayers' dollars on a manned moon base that has little apparent justification. “What is in the best interest of the country is never even mentioned in current NASA planning,” says Russell Schweickart, one of the *Apollo* astronauts who went into space in 1969, who is leading a campaign to raise awareness of the threat posed by space rocks. “Are we going to let a space strike kill millions of people before we get serious about this?” he asks.

In January, I attended an internal NASA conference, held at agency headquarters, during which NASA's core goals were presented in a PowerPoint slideshow. Nothing was said about protecting Earth from space strikes—not even researching what sorts of spacecraft might be used

near-Earth-objects program.” In a public address about a month later, Griffin said that the moon-base plan was “the finest policy framework for United States civil space activities that I have seen in 40 years.”

Actually, Congress *has* asked NASA to pay more attention to space rocks. In 2005, Congress instructed the agency to mount a sophisticated search of the proximate heavens for asteroids and comets, specifically requesting that NASA locate all near-Earth objects 140 meters or larger that are less than 1.3 astronomical units from the sun—roughly out to the orbit of Mars. Last year, NASA gave Congress its reply: an advanced search of the sort Congress was requesting would cost about \$1 billion, and the agency had no intention of diverting funds from existing projects, especially the moon-base initiative.

How did the moon-base idea arise? In 2003, after the shuttle *Columbia* was lost, manned space operations were temporarily shut down, and the White House spent a year studying possible new missions for NASA. George W. Bush wanted to announce a voyage to Mars. Every Oval Office



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occupant since John F. Kennedy knows how warmly history has praised him for the success of his pledge to put men on the moon; it's only natural that subsequent presidents would dream about securing their own place in history by sending people to the Red Planet. But the technical barriers and even the most optimistic cost projections for a manned mission to Mars are prohibitive. So in 2004, Bush unveiled a compromise plan: a permanent moon base that would be promoted as a stepping-stone for a Mars mission at some unspecified future date. As anyone with an aerospace engineering background well knows, stopping at the moon, as Bush was suggesting, actually would be an impediment to Mars travel, because huge amounts of fuel would be wasted landing on the moon and then blasting off again. Perhaps something useful to a Mars expedition would be learned in the course of building a moon base; but if the goal is the Red Planet, then spending vast sums on lunar living would only divert that money from the research and development needed for Mars hardware. However, saying that a moon base would one day support a Mars mission allowed Bush to create the impression that his plan would not merely be restaging an effort that had already been completed more than 30 years before. For NASA, a decades-long project to build a moon base would ensure a continuing flow of money to its favorite contractors and to the congressional districts where manned-space-program centers are located. So NASA signed on to the proposal, which Congress approved the following year.

It is instructive, in this context, to consider the agency's rhetoric about China. The Chinese manned space program has been improving and is now about where the U.S. program was in the mid-1960s. Stung by criticism that the moon-base project has no real justification—

37 years ago, President Richard Nixon cancelled the final planned *Apollo* moon missions because the program was accomplishing little at great expense; as early as 1964, the communitarian theorist Amitai Etzioni was calling lunar obsession a "moondoggle"—NASA is selling the new plan as a second moon race, this time against Beijing. "I'll be surprised if the Chinese don't reach the moon before we return," Griffin said. "China is now a strategic peer competitor to the United States in space. China is drawing national prestige from achievements in space, and there will be a tremendous shift in national prestige toward Beijing if the Chinese are operating on the moon and we are not. Great nations have always operated on the frontiers of their era. The moon is the frontier of our era, and we must outperform the Chinese there."

Wouldn't shifting NASA's focus away from wasting money on the moon and toward something of clear benefit for the entire world—identifying and deflecting dangerous space objects—be a surer route to enhancing national prestige? But NASA's institutional instinct is not to ask, "What can we do in space that makes sense?" Rather, it is to ask, "What can we do in space that requires lots of astronauts?" That finding and stopping space rocks would be an expensive mission with little role for the astronaut corps is, in all likelihood, the principal reason NASA doesn't want to talk about the asteroid threat.

NASA's lack of interest in defending against space objects leaves a void the Air Force seems eager to fill. The Air Force has the world's second-largest space program, with a budget of about \$11 billion—\$6 billion less than NASA's. The tension between the two entities is longstanding. Many in the Air Force believe the service could achieve U.S. space objectives faster and more effectively than NASA. And the Air Force simply wants flyboys in orbit: several times in the past, it has asked Congress to fund its own space station, its own space plane, and its own space-shuttle program. Now, with NASA all but ignoring the space-object threat, the Air Force appears to be seizing an opportunity.

All known space rocks have been discovered using telescopes designed for traditional "soda straw" astronomy—that is, focusing on a small patch of sky. Now the Air Force is funding the first research installation designed to conduct panoramic scans of the sky, a telescope complex called Pan-STARRS, being built by the University of Hawaii. By continuously panning the entire sky, Pan-STARRS should be able to spot many near-Earth objects that so far have gone undetected. The telescope also will have substantially better resolving power and sensitivity than existing survey instruments, enabling it to find small space rocks that have gone undetected because of their faintness.

The Pan-STARRS project has no military utility, so why is the Air Force the sponsor? One speculation is that Pan-STARRS is the Air Force's foot in the door for the Earth-

LESSON

The green leaf opens and the leaf falls,

each breath is a flame
that gives in to fire;

and grief is the price
we pay for love,

and the death of love
the fee of all desire.

—ROBIN ROBERTSON

Robin Robertson is from the northeast coast of Scotland. His third collection, *Swithering*, received the 2006 Forward Poetry Prize.

defense mission. If the Air Force won funding to build high-tech devices to fire at asteroids, this would be a major milestone in its goal of an expanded space presence. But space rocks are a natural hazard, not a military threat, and an Air Force Earth-protection initiative, however gallant, would probably cause intense international opposition. Imagine how other governments would react if the Pentagon announced, "Don't worry about those explosions in space—we're protecting you."

Thus, the task of defending Earth from objects falling from the skies seems most fitting for NASA, or perhaps for a multinational civilian agency that might be created. Which raises the question: What could NASA, or anyone else, actually do to provide a defense?

Russell Schweickart, the former *Apollo* astronaut, runs the B612 Foundation (B612 is the asteroid home of Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince). The foundation's goal is to get NASA officials, Congress, and ultimately the international community to take the space-rock threat seriously; it advocates testing a means of precise asteroid tracking, then trying to change the course of a near-Earth object.

rocks. Such a telescope would look outward from the inner solar system toward Earth, detect the slight warmth of asteroids and comets against the cold background of the cosmos, and track their movements with precision. Congress would need to fund a near-Venus telescope, though, and NASA would need to build it—neither of which is happening.

Another means of gathering data about a potentially threatening near-Earth object would be to launch a space probe toward it and attach a transponder, similar to the transponders used by civilian airliners to report their exact locations and speed; this could give researchers extremely precise information on the object's course. There is no doubt that a probe can rendezvous with a space rock: in 2005, NASA smashed a probe called *Deep Impact* into the nucleus of comet 9P/Tempel in order to vaporize some of the material on the comet's surface and make a detailed analysis of it. Schweickart estimates that a mission to attach a transponder to an impact-risk asteroid could be staged for about \$400 million—far less than the \$11.7 billion cost to NASA of the 2003 *Columbia* disaster.

Then what? In the movies, nuclear bombs are used to destroy space rocks. In NASA's 2007 report to Congress,

Placing a 'gravitational tractor'—a spacecraft weighing just a few tons—in exactly the right place might be enough to deflect an approaching asteroid.

Current telescopes cannot track asteroids or comets accurately enough for researchers to be sure of their courses. When 99942 Apophis was spotted, for example, some calculations suggested it would strike Earth in April 2029, but further study indicates it won't—instead, Apophis should pass between Earth and the moon, during which time it may be visible to the naked eye. The Pan-STARRS telescope complex will greatly improve astronomers' ability to find and track space rocks, and it may be joined by the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope, which would similarly scan the entire sky. Earlier this year, the software billionaires Bill Gates and Charles Simonyi pledged \$30 million for work on the LSST, which proponents hope to erect in the mountains of Chile. If it is built, it will be the first major telescope to broadcast its data live over the Web, allowing countless professional and amateur astronomers to look for undiscovered asteroids.

Schweickart thinks, however, that even these instruments will not be able to plot the courses of space rocks with absolute precision. NASA has said that an infrared telescope launched into an orbit near Venus could provide detailed information on the exact courses of space

the agency suggested a similar approach. But nukes are a brute-force solution, and because an international treaty bans nuclear warheads in space, any proposal to use them against an asteroid would require complex diplomatic agreements. Fortunately, it's likely that just causing a slight change in course would avert a strike. The reason is the mechanics of orbits. Many people think of a planet as a vacuum cleaner whose gravity sucks in everything in its vicinity. It's true that a free-falling body will plummet toward the nearest source of gravity—but in space, free-falling bodies are rare. Earth does not plummet into the sun, because the angular momentum of Earth's orbit is in equilibrium with the sun's gravity. And asteroids and comets swirl around the sun with tremendous angular momentum, which prevents them from falling toward most of the bodies they pass, including Earth.

For any space object approaching a planet, there exists a "keyhole"—a patch in space where the planet's gravity and the object's momentum align, causing the asteroid or comet to hurtle toward the planet. Researchers have calculated the keyholes for a few space objects and found that they are tiny, only a few hundred meters across—

pinpoints in the immensity of the solar system. You might think of a keyhole as the win-a-free-game opening on the 18th tee of a cheesy, incredibly elaborate miniature-golf course. All around the opening are rotating windmills, giants stomping their feet, dragons walking past, and other obstacles. If your golf ball hits the opening precisely, it will roll down a pipe for a hole in one. Miss by even a bit, and the ball caroms away.

Tiny alterations might be enough to deflect a space rock headed toward a keyhole. "The reason I am optimistic about stopping near-Earth-object impacts is that it looks like we won't need to use fantastic levels of force," Schweickart says. He envisions a "gravitational tractor," a spacecraft weighing only a few tons—enough to have a slight gravitational field. If an asteroid's movements were precisely understood, placing a gravitational tractor in exactly the right place should, ever so slowly, alter the rock's course, because low levels of gravity from the tractor would tug at the asteroid. The rock's course would change only by a minuscule amount, but it would miss the hole-in-one pipe to Earth.

Will the gravitational-tractor idea work? The B612 Foundation recommends testing the technology on an asteroid that has no chance of approaching Earth. If the gravitational tractor should prove impractical or ineffective, other solutions could be considered. Attaching a rocket motor to the side of an asteroid might change its course. So might firing a laser: as materials boiled off the asteroid, the expanding gases would serve as a natural jet engine, pushing it in the opposite direction.

But when it comes to killer comets, you'll just have to lose sleep over the possibility of their approach; there are no proposals for what to do about them. Comets are easy to see when they are near the sun and glowing but are difficult to detect at other times. Many have "eccentric" orbits, spending centuries at tremendous distances from the sun, then falling toward the inner solar system, then slingshotting away again. If you were to add comets to one of those classroom models of the solar system, many would need to come from other floors of the building, or from another school district, in order to be to scale. Advanced telescopes will probably do a good job of detecting most asteroids that pass near Earth, but an unknown comet suddenly headed our way would be a nasty surprise. And because many comets change course when the sun heats their sides and causes their frozen gases to expand, deflecting or destroying them poses technical problems to which there are no ready solutions. The logical first step, then, seems to be to determine how to prevent an asteroid from striking Earth and hope that some future advance, perhaps one building on the asteroid work, proves useful against comets.

None of this will be easy, of course. Unlike in the movies, where impossibly good-looking, wisecracking

men and women grab space suits and race to the launchpad immediately after receiving a warning that something is approaching from space, in real life preparations to defend against a space object would take many years. First the necessary hardware must be built—quite possibly a range of space probes and rockets. An asteroid that appeared to pose a serious risk would require extensive study, and a transponder mission could take years to reach it. International debate and consensus would be needed: the possibility of one nation acting alone against a space threat or of, say, competing U.S. and Chinese missions to the same object, is more than a little worrisome. And suppose Asteroid X appeared to threaten Earth. A mission by, say, the United States to deflect or destroy it might fail, or even backfire, by nudging the rock toward a gravitational keyhole rather than away from it. Asteroid X then hits Costa Rica; is the U.S. to blame? In all likelihood, researchers will be unable to estimate where on Earth a space rock will hit. Effectively, then, everyone would be threatened, another reason nations would need to act cooperatively—and achieving international cooperation could be a greater impediment than designing the technology.

We will soon have a new president, and thus an opportunity to reassess NASA's priorities. Whoever takes office will decide whether the nation commits to spending hundreds of billions of dollars on a motel on the moon, or invests in space projects of tangible benefit—space science, environmental studies of Earth, and readying the world for protection against a space-object strike. Although the moon-base initiative has been NASA's focus for four years, almost nothing has yet been built for the project, and comparatively little money has been spent; current plans don't call for substantial funding until the space-shuttle program ends, in 2010. This suggests that NASA could back off from the moon base without having wasted many resources. Further, the new Ares rocket NASA is designing for moon missions might be just the ticket for an asteroid-deflection initiative.

Congress, too, ought to look more sensibly at space priorities. Because it controls federal funding, Congress holds the trump cards. In 2005, it passively approved the moon-base idea, seemingly just as budgetary log-rolling to maintain spending in the congressional districts favored under NASA's current budget hierarchy. The House and Senate ought to demand that the space program have as its first priority returning benefits to taxpayers. It's hard to imagine how taxpayers could benefit from a moon base. It's easy to imagine them benefiting from an effort to protect our world from the ultimate calamity. ▀

Gregg Easterbrook is a contributing editor of *The Atlantic* and *The New Republic*, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, and the author, most recently, of *The Progress Paradox* (2003).

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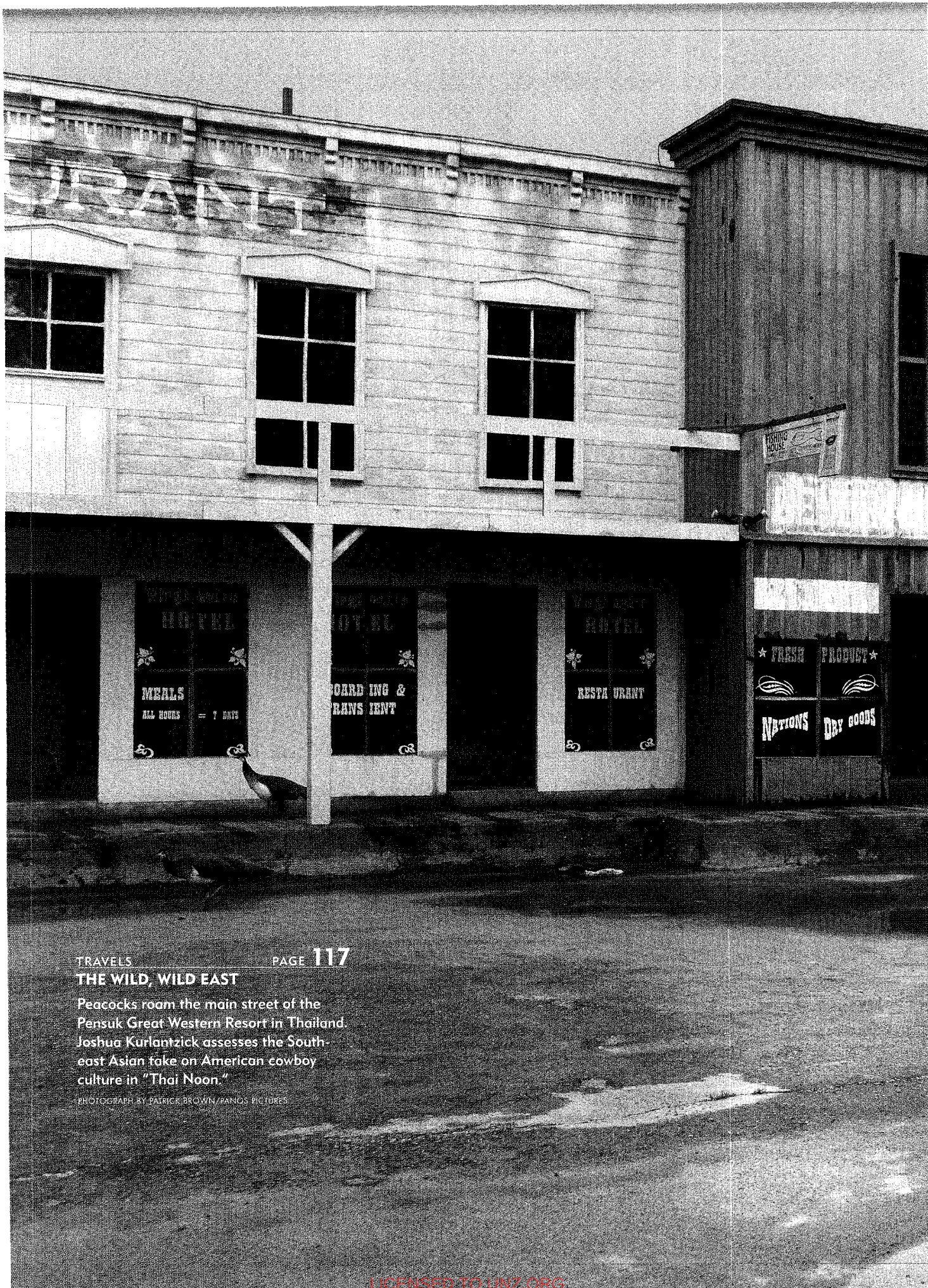


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THE WILD, WILD EAST

Peacocks roam the main street of the Pensuk Great Western Resort in Thailand. Joshua Kurlantzick assesses the Southeast Asian take on American cowboy culture in "Thai Noon."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK BROWN/PANOS PICTURES

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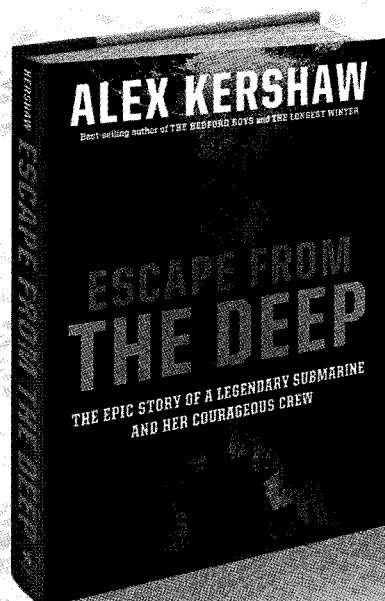
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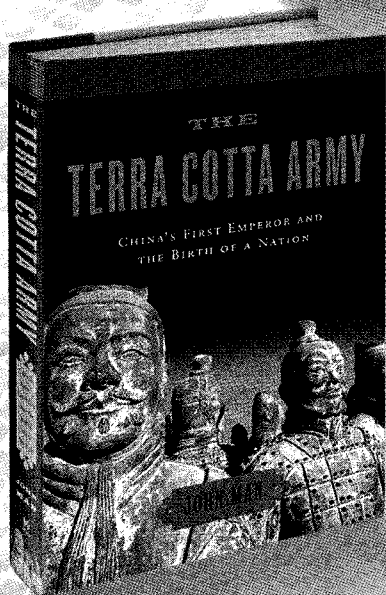
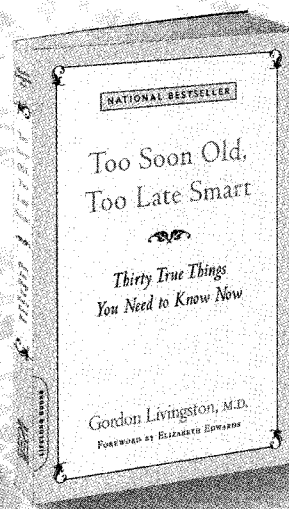
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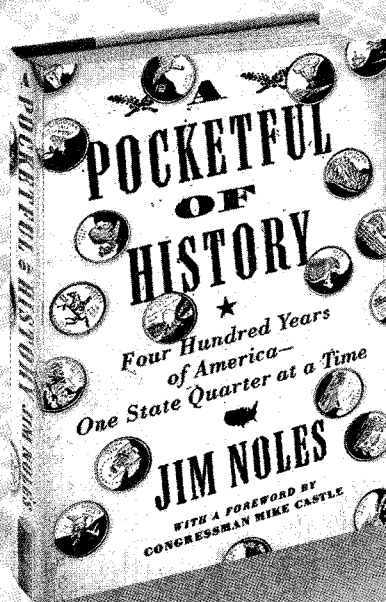
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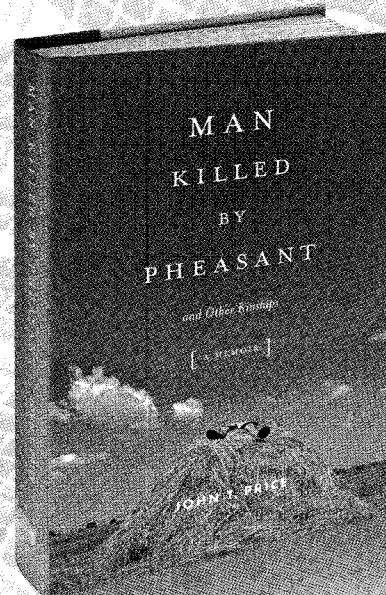
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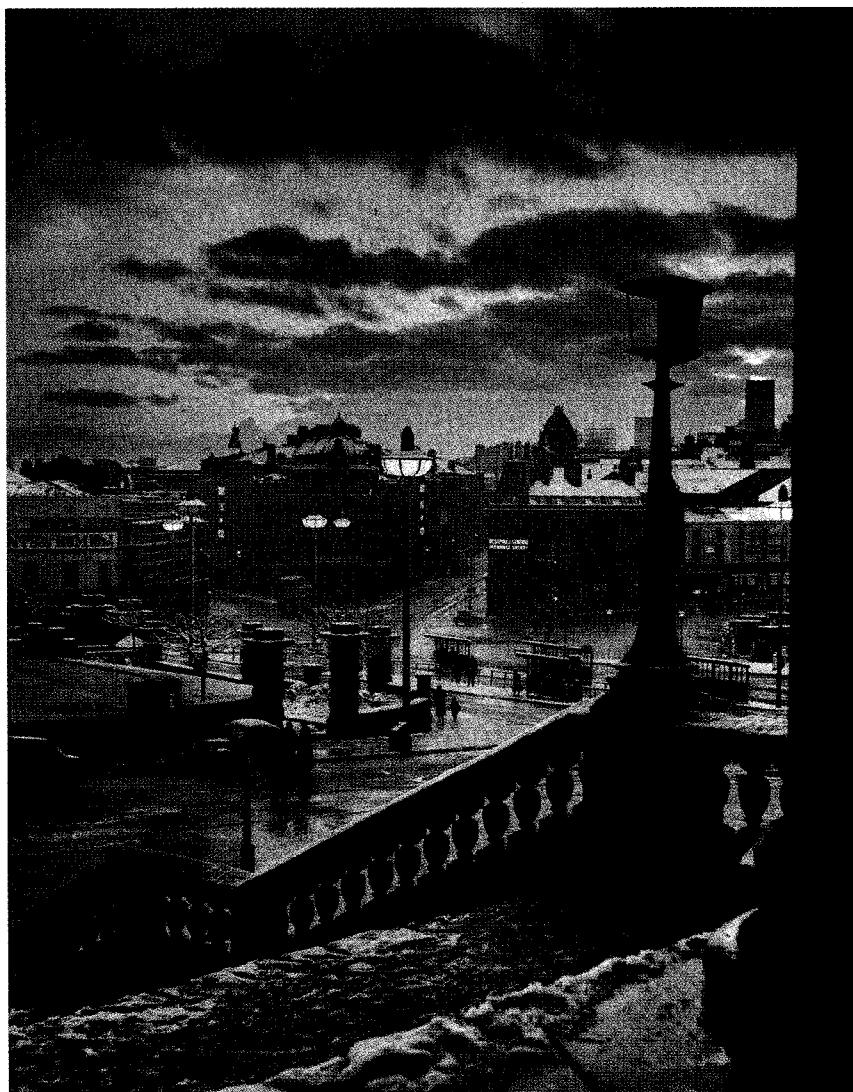
Waste Not, Want Everything

BY BENJAMIN SCHWARZ

While writing his masterpiece, *Portrait of an Age*, the historian G. M. Young came to apprehend that “the real, central theme of History is not what happened, but what people felt about it when it was happening: in Philip Sidney’s phrase, ‘the affects, the whispering, the motions of the people.’” A historian will fulfill his promise, Young believed (he was quoting Frederic Maitland), only when “the thoughts of our forefathers, their common thoughts about common things, will have become thinkable once more.” I haven’t read a history book that comes closer to realizing Young’s ideal than David Kynaston’s *Austerity Britain*.

The first in a projected multivolume chronicle of the years from 1945 to 1979 called *Tales of a New Jerusalem*, this sparkling book—deeply and imaginatively researched, written with bounce, and informed by the wryest sensibility—charts the evolution of British society during the depleted and dingy years 1945–1951. As Britain shifted from desperate war to bankrupt peace, its Labour government set about building the first welfare state and attempting in myriad ways to uplift the country and its people, a project fraught with the painful collisions between political idealism and people’s daily lives and aspirations.

“Austerity”—a condition and set of policies dictated by the government’s need, owing to a gigantic balance-of-payments deficit with the United States, to limit consumption to wartime levels and divert labor and material to the export trade—meant a home front without a war. Food, clothing, and coal would now in some cases be even more sparingly apportioned than they had been



CHRIST, IT'S BLEEDING COLD: Museum steps, Liverpool, 1946

when the war was on; the British would not go completely “off ration” until 1954. With wit and ingenuity, Kynaston mines opinion surveys, radio shows, advertising slogans, parliamentary reports, and above all letters, diaries, and memoirs to evoke the gray tinge that permeated

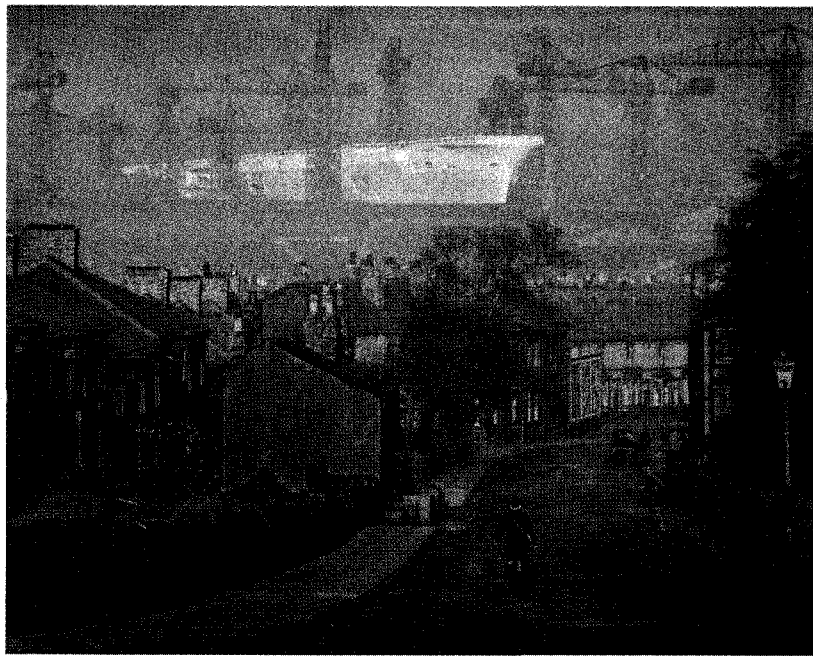
postwar life—the shabby frocks, the sallow faces, the grubby train compartments, the dreary meals (“all winter greens and root vegetables and hamburgers made of grated potato and oatmeal and just a little meat,” the food writer Marguerite Patten recalled).

Austerity, though, was merely an underlying condition—like the weather (the winter of 1946–1947, the coldest of the century, added immeasurably to both the dismal general atmosphere and the challenges confronting the government) and the oppressive weight of the Victorian industrial environment (the massive red-brick factories and the smoke in the valleys, now all but gone and hence, Kynaston says, one of the hardest things for the historian to re-create)—that shaped the totality of the British national experience, which is the real subject of this audaciously ambitious, nearly 700-page work. Although Kynaston doesn't say so, Orwell's *The English People* and A.J.P. Taylor's *English History, 1914–1945* clearly inspired his approach. Published in 1947, Orwell's dissection of the English national character and culture in the age of austerity was as brief, polemical,

wrongheaded, and impressionistic as it was brilliant. Taylor's supremely stylish, pioneering history chronicled affairs of state as well as the hopes, fears, and pleasures of ordinary citizens. Taylor treated those two strands in parallel; Kynaston artfully interweaves them, even as he makes clear the almost universal popular indifference to politics and policy and the "profound cultural mismatch between progressive activators and the millions acted upon."

The result is a work that probes the personal and political clashes within the Labour Party intelligentsia—and recounts how women appropriated and adapted the New Look fashions; that analyzes labor-management relations in the British automotive industry—and traces the relationship between

the decline in married women's employment and changes in landscape design; that assesses the birth and progress of the National Health Service (a provision embraced by the women's magazines, even those of the haute monde)—and adumbrates the impact of the hit BBC radio series *Listen With Mother* on a generation of children; that explores the political subculture of the miners—and discusses the extent to which the remark



HMS ARK ROYAL, Birkenhead, 1950

of one working-class wife ("he's very good, he doesn't bother me much") typified married sexual relations. Throughout, Kynaston is alive to the peculiar tactile features—the "heavy coins, heavy shoes, heavy suitcases, heavy tweed coats, heavy leather footballs"—that make this recent past a foreign country.

Sports forms one leitmotif. Kynaston, who has written two books of cricket history as well as a groundbreaking four-volume (!) history of that insular financial powerhouse, the City of London, recounts various meets, races, and matches to demonstrate the colossal, never-to-be-exceeded place that sports-watching and betting commanded in everyday life. The record-breaking attendance figures for soccer, dog races, and speedway no doubt signified the

ascendancy of working-class culture in national life; the audience for cricket, which appealed especially to the middle and upper classes, also reached its apogee, and for everyone sports must have compensated for the many things that, thanks to rationing, money couldn't buy. I wish Kynaston had more to say about the Victorian seaside resorts, the dance halls, and the pictures, all of which were also at the peak of their popularity. He fails to note, for example, that the six years he scrutinizes constitute the greatest era in British cinematic history, in which *Odd Man Out*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *Black Narcissus*, *I Know Where I'm Going!*, *The Third Man*, *Fallen Idol*, *The Red Shoes*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, *Brighton Rock*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *Hamlet*, *Passport to Pimlico*, and *Brief Encounter* were made; of the British Film Institute's list

of the 10 best British movies, fully half were made in this period.

The author's purview is "the characteristic activities and interests of a people," to quote T. S. Eliot's all-embracing definition of culture, and in offering what he calls "an intimate, multilayered, multivoiced, unsentimental portrait of a society," Kynaston will juxtapose the news of Hiroshima with, say, the (in many corners) far more intense and animated talk of "the new 'cold perm'!" The sum could have been a cacophonous and impressionistic mess. And, indeed, Kynaston's narrative is constantly poised on a high-wire. He consciously tries to impart a sense of the fortuitousness and richness of the everyday, with its jumble of seismic and banal events, and he seems to relish smashing any too-neat frame the

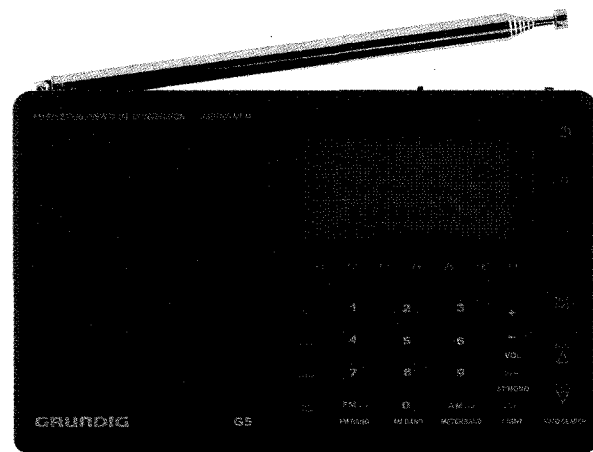
analytically inclined reader would impose on his story. For instance, whereas the period's grubbiness and what Elizabeth David called its "unspeakably dismal meals" are all but palpable in his narrative, Kynaston also signals that the implications of austerity and rationing were very different for different classes. Again and again he reminds readers that the working class, which made up 75 percent of the country, had never had it so good: its standard of living was 10 percent higher in 1948 than a decade earlier, even as that of the middle class declined by 20 percent. And for unskilled workers and the unemployed, the mandated fairness of rationing ensured adequate food. Moreover, the drab but calculatedly nutritious rationed diet gave Britain the healthiest people in its history. In fact children ate more healthfully under rationing than they did in the 1990s—a fact "to gladden any puritan's heart: a shortage of money and of choice was positively beneficial."

For all its abundance and intricacy, *Austerity Britain* never devolves into an unfocused cut-and-paste job. Kynaston's sense of structure and pacing is sure, his mastery of his astonishingly diverse material unflinching (see his opening set piece on VE Day). More vividly and penetratingly than any work of history I can recall, this book captures the rhythms and texture of everyday life. To read it is to enter a world, which helps explain why it became a surprise best seller in the U.K.

The voices of women—largely middle-class, usually housewives—dominate this panoramic but fine-grained portrait of the quotidian. Recurring references to the unpublished diaries of a dozen ordinary women form the backbone of the book (my favorite is that of the sunny, astute, middle-class, Labour-voting Judy Haines, who plainly relished a sweet life spent with her young children), and Kynaston discerningly draws on such works as *Rising Twenty*, Pearl Jephcott's closely observed 1948 study of 100 late-adolescent girls; Mollie Panter-Downes's cool, ironic fiction and journalism; and Carolyn Kay Steedman's



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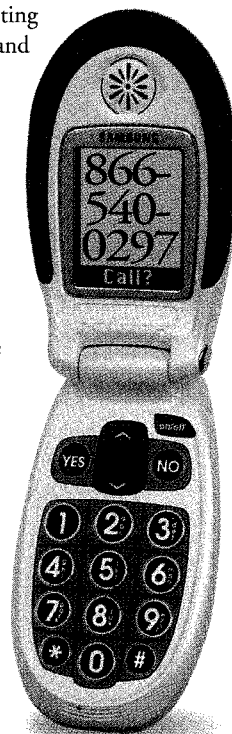
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sharp reminiscence of her stropic, Tory-voting, working-class mother, *Landscape for a Good Woman*. What clearly emerges from Kynaston's book is how much more exquisitely than men women experienced daily life, acutely analyzed and assimilated that experience, and shrewdly, vividly, and precisely spoke and wrote about it. Adding to whatever innate differences may exist between the sexes' mentalities, women's sharper sensitivity here probably owes something to the fact that although conditions and pay in the factories were improving, women felt daily the impact of larger forces on their routines and domestic arrangements—queuing for food in a half-dozen shops, say, and assembling meals from scarce, unpalatable, and frequently bizarre ingredients (the subject of Susan Cooper's scintillating and celebrated essay "Snoek Piquante"). Regardless, in elevating women's everyday and inner lives—the former largely making up the latter—and scrupulously taking women's anxieties, preoccupations, and attachments on their own terms, this is a deeply feminist work, if an unconventional and unusually nuanced one.

Kynaston's focus on women sheds light on his broadest theme: the chasm between the intellectuals, mandarins, and planners and those who were the object of their ministrations, "the much-invoked, less often consulted ... British people." Long before its electoral victory in 1945, the Labour Party had expanded its ranks beyond old trade unionists like Aneurin Bevan—who memorably declared to his working-class comrades that "we have been the dreamers, we have been the sufferers, now we are the builders" and who promised that "the first claims upon the national product ... shall be ... the women, the children, and the old people"—to include an ascendant, brainy, progressive bunch. Far more bent on cultural renewal than on economic or social egalitarianism, this new group actually believed, as Deputy Prime Minister Herbert Morrison said in a phrase as quaint as it is chilling, that "part of our work in politics ... must

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be to improve human nature." It wanted a nation of joiners, and sought to build an active, informed, progressive-minded citizenry by means of a high-minded hodgepodge of discussion groups, amateur theatrical clubs, debating societies, and community dining halls ("very popular ... in Scandinavia," noted one Labour official by way of endorsement).

The reformers were confronted with the most unpromising clay to work with. Emerging from Kynaston's minute examination of the everyday is the British people's profound social conservatism: its unshakable ability to tune out all earnest discussion of politics and world affairs and stick to talk about dog races, gardens, and hemlines; its strictly limited appetite for the communal ("many women dislike the idea of nursery schools," one observer noticed; "they want to look after their own children"); and its devotion to those twin entities that women defined and presided over, the home and the nuclear family.

At war's end, Britain faced a housing crisis. German bombs had destroyed or severely damaged 750,000 houses, and virtually no new ones had been built for six years. Kynaston shows that, far more than national health insurance or the nationalization of industry, "across the country, it was on the home that most people's hopes and concerns were really focused." In their diaries and letters as well as in survey after survey, people made clear their strong dislikes in housing ("nothing less than a mass aversion towards the whole idea of flats," Kynaston characterizes it) and their equally strong desire: a small suburban house with a garden. The planners and reformers would have none of it. Stridently communal, possessed of what Kynaston describes as an "almost visceral anti-suburban bias" and an accompanying conviction that "explicitly identified social virtue and cohesion in living cheek by jowl" in apartments and planned "New Towns" (innovations, Orwell noted, that would tend to break up the family), they wouldn't let the preferences of the public vitiate their glorious designs. As one of them, the economist P. Sargent Florence,

declared, the predilections of "architects and planners" should trump "the inarticulate yearnings of the average working-class housewife." When addressing an unruly public meeting that opposed his "New Town" planning schemes designed to create "a new type of citizen," Lewis Silkin, the minister of town and country planning, put it more bluntly: "It's no good your jeering; it is going to be done." Ah, the People's Tribunes.

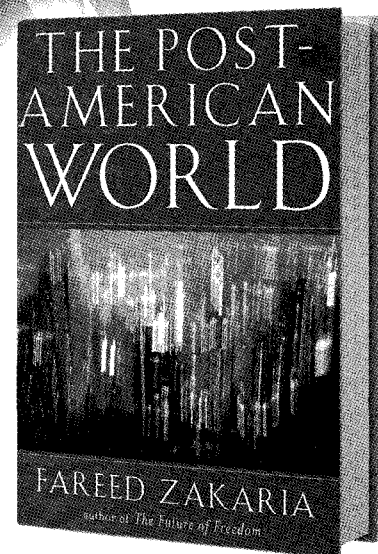
To a surprising extent Kynaston's entire, intricate portrait of British society can be summed up in Orwell's sweeping generalization: in a famous passage in *The Lion and the Unicorn* defining the English character (not quoted in *Austerity Britain*), Orwell wrote of a

characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it, and that is ... the *privateness* of English life. We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters ... All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official—the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the 'nice cup of tea'. The liberty of the individual is still believed in ... It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above. The most hateful of all names in an English ear is Nosey Parker.

If there are villains in this book, they're the progressives—Nosey Parkers with power—but Kynaston's treatment of them is cheeky rather than hostile. And while the solid virtues of the working class emerge from his account, so do the parochialism and racial intolerance endemic to it. Indeed, his judgment is implicit but clear: Austerity Britain was a better place for being a worse place. Kynaston doesn't shrink from an understanding that's deeply unsettling to those who like their history, their politics, and their worldviews neat (which is to say nearly all of us): the better grew out of the worse, the worse out of the better. ■

Benjamin Schwarz is *The Atlantic's* literary editor and national editor.

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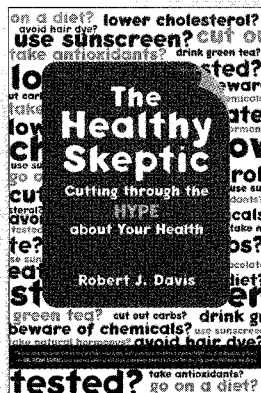
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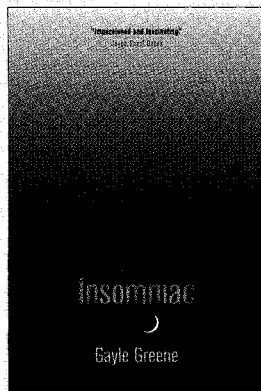
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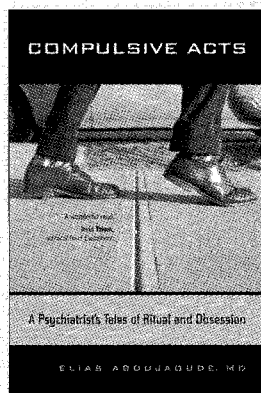


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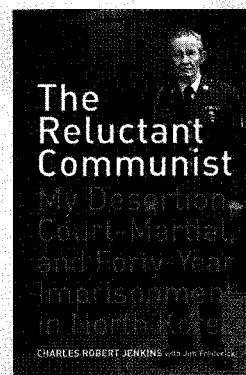
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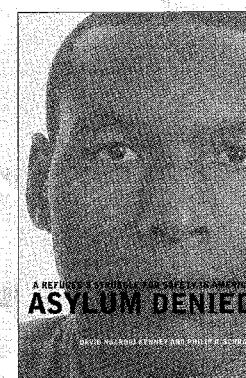
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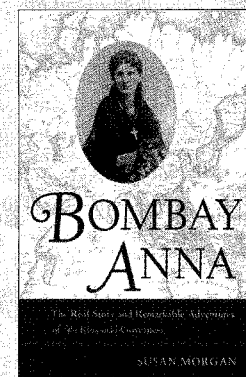
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BOOKS

Barbara Walters got the story by giving her subjects what they wanted.

The Uses of Enchantment

BY CAITLIN FLANAGAN

The career, God knows, has been long. A book is in order. And let's not kid ourselves—if not now, when? Lately, her appearances on *The View* bring to mind the final years of the Reagan presidency. Lucidity is waning; recall plays tricks. Too often, a tiny, nut-brown hand waves vaguely in the air, or—fingers balled up into a little fist—raps sharply on the big, shared desk as she tries her damndest to call forth the name of some famous actor or politician, or the salient

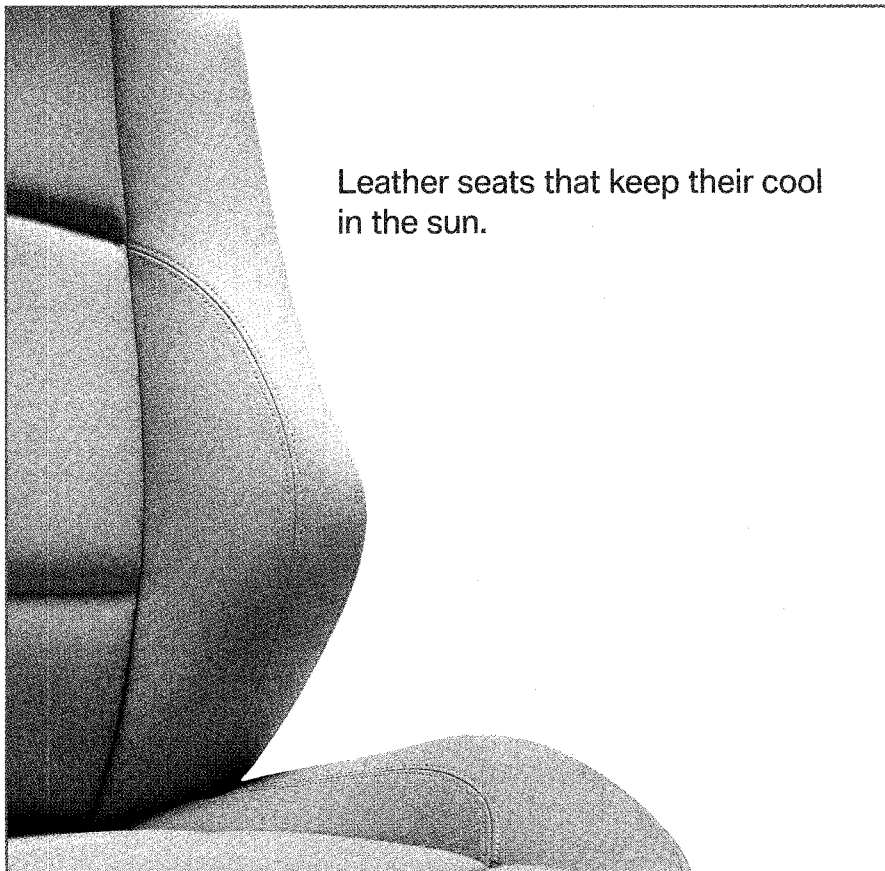
details of a recent scandal. Her well-known list of most desired “gets” has become a death roll. The time has come.

And the book is a triumph! While the morning’s “Hot Topics” are a frustrating 20 minutes of words ever on the tip of the tongue, the glories of yesteryear are seen as if through the lens of the world’s most powerful telescope. Today is a muddle, but yesterday is Byzantium,

all hammered gold and precious jewels. Barbara Walters has known presidents and kings, famous call girls and genteel murderers, Nobel Prize winners and dumb blondes who have changed the world. She has floated on the Dead Sea by moonlight and interviewed Moshe Dayan in his backyard. She has been to the ancient city of Persepolis to observe the 2,500-year anniversary of the Persian

AUDITION:
A Memoir
by Barbara
Walters
Knopf

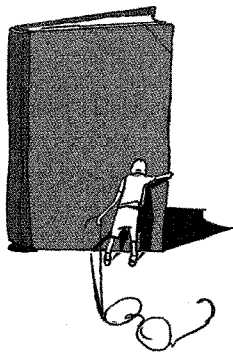
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monarchy, where 50 yellow and blue tents had been erected by “Jansen of Paris, the hot interior decorator,” and filled with Limoges, Baccarat, Porthault linens, and two tons of Iranian caviar. She has chatted in a palace garden with Princess Grace, eaten prime rib and potatoes off TV-dinner trays with Katharine Hepburn, bounced around the Reagan ranch in Ronnie’s favorite Jeep, motor-boated across the Bay of Pigs with Fidel Castro, risked a nighttime landing during a Baghdad blackout to interview Saddam Hussein, been admitted into Muammar Qaddafi’s desert tent (where she worried that her pink knit suit would clash with the general’s green-and-white mufti), brokered and conducted the first joint interview with Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, pressed her body tight to Sylvester Stallone’s while his Harley roared between their legs.

Hers has been a big, show-biz life, one in which a certain type of snub—the bad table at an important party; the misspelling of her daughter’s name in a personal note—rankles for decades, and in which kindnesses register on a meter that is highly sensitive and always running—Princess Diana walking Barbara not just to the door of Kensington Palace but all the way to her car; Richard and Dorothy Rodgers ensuring that her suitcases were unpacked, and her clothes hung up or folded in tissue paper, when she arrived at their sumptuous house for weekends; Bing Crosby’s butler wrapping up a death-bed souvenir (a pair of reading glasses) and sending it to Barbara’s mother.

It wasn’t all perfect; it wasn’t all easy. You try flirting with Dick Nixon for four punishing years of White House dinners and dingbat late-night phone calls, only to have him give the big Watergate interview to David Frost. You try adding a bit of fun to a one-hour special by showing viewers a glimpse of your own New York apartment in between exclusive interviews with a reclusive movie star and a president-elect, and then wake up to Morley Safer broadcasting: “sandwiched between the white bread of the Carters and the pumpnickel

of Streisand, we were treated to the pastrami of Ms. Walters herself." Sure, it was hard when the Bennett Cerfs dropped her like Typhoid Mary when she ticked off Sinatra; and yes, it was painful when her only child plunged into drugs and ran away from home. But this is not a list of regrets; this is not a settling of scores. Didn't Duke Wayne himself tell her not to let the bastards get her down?

Where did it all begin? At the Latin Quarter, her father's Miami Beach nightclub, amid the fan dancers and chorus girls and headliners: Jimmy Durante and Sophie Tucker and Señor Wences and Milton Berle. With a small girl's awareness that backstage, where the make-up comes off and the feet slip out of the dancing shoes, all these glittering freaks and marvels are just people, with the same old collection of miseries and blunders, dreams and self-delusions as anyone else. It began with the understanding that the two together—the dazzling apparition in the footlights and the weary hoofer pulling off her pasties and checking the bus schedule—were the core of something important, some kind of expression about the human condition.

It began too on the day she opened the letter from Wellesley and discovered that she had been wait-listed. This is the original snub, the one that built a fire wall between her and the company she wanted to keep. It had been an audacious notion, the idea that Wellesley would accept the hard-working little Jewish girl with the Cuban heels and the father in burlesque and the New York apartment (by then, there was a Latin Quarter in Times Square) that her mother had decorated in pale yellow and lavender brocade, "like a huge Easter egg." She ended up at Sarah Lawrence, where the family background was no problem, and which offered an untested, brand-new kind of education, one designed as an alternative to the tradition and pomp offered at America's elite colleges—but Barbara, of course, was from a social class and a particular family background in which notions of tradition and pomp were goals in

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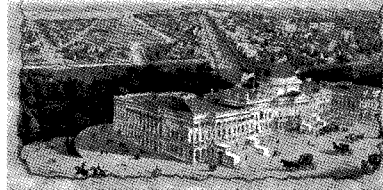
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themselves, and she suffered. And that snub keeps coming back to smack her in the ass. Where did Diane Sawyer go to college? And Hillary Clinton? And Lynn Sherr? What would her life have been like if she had rolled the dice, waited all summer to see if Wellesley would find a space for her? But—no regrets. Didn't she make something of herself? Didn't she do it all on her own, with no man to help her, no pedigree or rampart of yellow hair?

Audition is a bit like a presidential memoir—long, comprehensive, ever mindful of the people who must be named and thanked along the way. (We are advised that as soon as we finish the book, we should rush out to buy and devour Alan Greenspan's "fascinating read about his 18 years as chairman of the Federal Reserve.") The chapters bear carefully considered titles, some of which sound like the names of really bad perfumes—"Finally, Fidel"—and some of which convey such forthright accountings of their deadly contents—"Dean Rusk, Golda Meir, Henry Kissinger, and Prince Philip"—that it seems Barbara herself is telling us, "Go ahead, skip this one."

Her book is composed of four strands: accounts of the interviews (padded, but fascinating); behind-the-scenes contract negotiations with her various employers (dull); reminiscences about her domestic arrangements, beginning in childhood (carefully couched, but interesting); and kiss-and-tell revelations about her romantic life, which just about killed me. In her day, Barbara Walters was a roundheels, a home-wrecker, and a two-timer, which ought to have made for great copy, but reading about these events was as off-putting as having your own mother tell you about the first time she reached orgasm. Furthermore, while her exploits were many, they lacked intensity, which lends them an aura of forced athleticism rather than commanding passion. Her several marriages seem to just peter out, her affairs drift away from her; she ends up sleeping with Alan Greenspan. She has apparently

waited to these 40 years to tell the world that she was once romantically involved with a married black man, but "Barbara Walters" and "jungle fever" are not concepts one wants jangling together in the imagination.

The erotic impulse seems to have attached itself most strongly to her work, and to the development of the Barbara Walters interview method, which—even more than the interviews themselves—is her greatest achievement, and which ought to be studied by anyone with an interest in talking to people and recording their words for posterity. Few broadcasters have been as maligned and as ridiculed by serious journalists as has Barbara Walters, but over the years, she has elicited more irreducible statements of self from more notable people than have all the giants of New Journalism:

Judy Garland (three hours late for her interview and two years away from her fatal overdose): "The only mistake I ever made, the only harm I ever did, was sing 'Over the Rainbow.'"

Truman Capote (after the publication of *In Cold Blood*): "The only thing I couldn't do without is my own conviction about my own creative gifts."

Rose Kennedy (on the fifth anniversary of Jack's death and five months after Bobby's, bringing her count of dead children to four): "I just made up my mind that I was not going to be vanquished."

Bing Crosby (after being asked if he would really disown his daughter if she had sex outside of marriage): "Aloha on the steel guitar."

Jean Harris (on trying to make visitors' day run more smoothly at her prison): "I kept saying to them, 'Please let me have the list and I'll arrange it alphabetically for you.' And the guard said to me, 'It won't do any good, because they don't come alphabetically.'"

The Barbara Walters method begins with nurturing and magnifying the subject's most exalted sense of him- or herself, and assuring the subject that this is the frame in which the story of the life will appear. Thus, Angelina Jolie isn't a movie-star do-gooder; she works with "the United Nations High Commissioner

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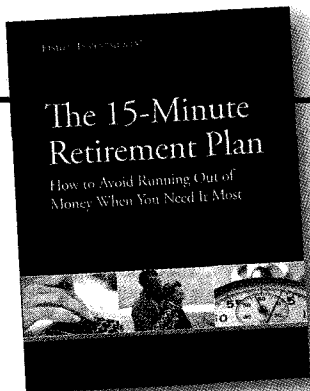


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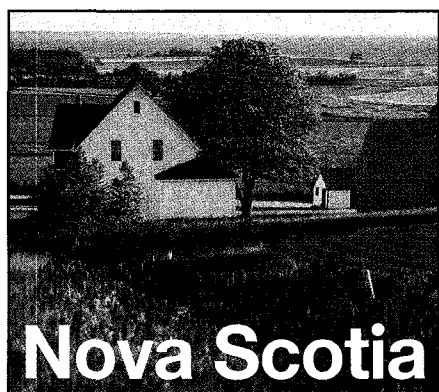
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for Refugees.” Henry Kissinger is not a courtier who apparently orchestrated the killing of innocents; he’s a peace-loving Jewish boy from the town next to Nuremberg who still gets tears in his eyes when he visits the old soccer pitch with Barbara. Walters believes—accurately, as it turns out—that once she has proven to her subjects that she will hew to the story about themselves that they most want broadcast (with actresses, it’s usually the notion that they are “beginning the happiest chapter” of their lives, and with people like Kissinger, it’s that they are not war criminals), they will relax into the candor necessary to reveal the humiliations, sufferings, and missteps that make the interviews so fascinating.

More people have revealed more humiliating episodes to Barbara Walters than to any other reporter, but remarkably few have ever been angry about an interview with her, because she has never sold one of them out. Many writers have learned the art of falling in love with a subject during the long course of reporting a story, but once the final bar tab has been paid and the celebrity deposited one last time into a waiting town car, the surgeon snaps on his gloves and makes the long, opening cut. But with Barbara, the love only grows. To this day she believes, adamantly, that JonBenet Ramsey’s parents are innocent, that Jean Harris should have been pardoned immediately, and that Monica Lewinsky’s master’s degree from the London School of Economics is proof of a first-rate intelligence.

There is a widely held belief that Barbara Walters’s career stands as a testament to the power of the women’s movement. When she and Rosie O’Donnell were feuding, Rosie urged her own fans not to be too harsh: “She’s a feminist icon,” she counseled them on her Web site. This notion arises principally from Barbara’s being the first woman to appear behind the anchor desk of a nightly news program, as well as from her track record of getting exclusive interviews with so many world leaders. Her anchoring was hardly a success—it was one of her only ratings disasters, and she

was summarily bumped—and her interviews, while an undeniable achievement, were not a feminist victory, but rather the very opposite: an essentially feminine victory, one in which a man’s game was played not by changing the rules of engagement, but by using the oldest of female wiles and manipulations.

Barbara Walters did not earn exclusive interviews with some of the most important international figures of her heyday by revealing to them a deep intellectual engagement with foreign and domestic policy. Nor did she do it by deploying pulchritude—minus the lighting and make-up, she has always looked like the love child of Madeleine Albright and Spiro Agnew. She did it by understanding the male ego, and the fact that powerful men are so eager to have a woman’s attention and respect that a careful question, combined with a sufficiently awed reaction, will have them lining up to tell their stories. “What is the first job you ever held?” she liked to ask very rich men whom she was wooing for an interview. “What is the biggest misconception about you?” she asked, and when they answered she nodded gravely, as though finally the truth was being revealed, as though finally the matter could be laid to rest. Her job, always, was to place herself in the position of wide-eyed acolyte. She never engaged in a battle of wits with a subject, never attempted to win an argument, and she learned early on not to interrupt. She flirted, but in the old, careful way of a courtesan, not a seducer. She always ensured that the wife was enclosed in the circle of attention (*Audition* leaves us with the impression that every dictator in the world has chosen a “down-to-earth” and “easy to talk to” and “remarkable” helpmeet), establishing that hers was not a mission of sexual conquest.

And she asked these world leaders the questions that women wanted to hear answered. Sure, she gave Nixon the old blah-blah-blah about Vietnam, but what everyone remembers is when she asked him why people thought he was so stuffy, and he worked himself into a lather, proving that he wasn’t always

stuff; sometimes he was angry. She did her homework on the energy crisis and the Middle East before going down to Plains to talk to Jimmy Carter, but she hit pay dirt when she asked him if he and Rosalynn slept in twin beds or a double.

Along the way, some say, she cheapened television news immeasurably, turning every politician or head of state she got her hands on into a human-interest story, someone whose daily habits, romantic inclinations, and personality trumped whatever bit of statecraft they were currently advancing. She approached her subjects the way the great Women's Page writers used to approach them, from the standpoint that plenty of information was readily available about their philosophy and tactics, but that the missing piece of the puzzle was the private man, the husband.

sewing machines, and face cream and shampoo were sold "by the glob." In the end, she rightly recognized that we are most fascinated by the everyday details, the emotions and habits through which we can relate the extraordinary life or circumstance to our own.

In 1997, ABC approached Walters to see if she had an idea for a program to be broadcast mid-morning (the loneliest time of day, Walters had long known, for the at-home mother). "Well, now that they mentioned it, I did," she reports; she had always wanted to "do a show with women of different generations, backgrounds, and views." She envisioned a long opening segment, in which the hosts would discuss various issues of the day. Hence *The View*, and hence "Hot Topics," which instantly became the show's most popular feature, as it remains to this day;

Barbara Walters has elicited more irreducible statements of self from more notable people than have all the giants of New Journalism.

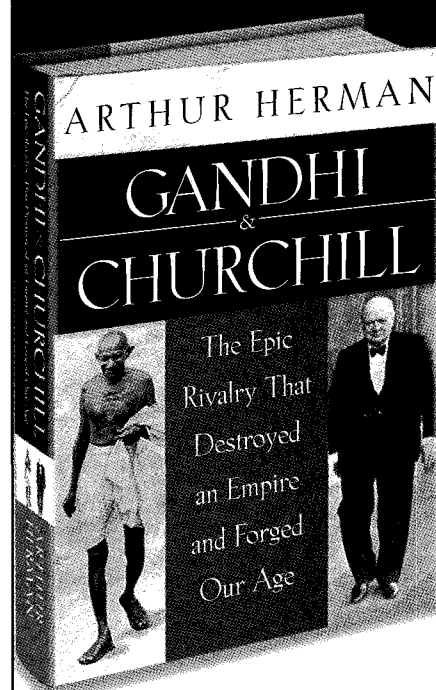
We might dismiss Walters here as the world's greatest booker but most intellectually incurious interviewer. And yet, reading her book, I was impressed by how much her interests and reportorial inclinations have stood the test of time.

I can't imagine being even mildly interested in a new revelation about the diplomacy that took place during Nixon's trip to China, but Barbara's report that her hotel room there was always stocked with postcards featuring scenes of Chinese ballets, and that she could not throw a pair of panty hose or a used Kleenex into the wastebasket without having it returned to her neatly wrapped up like a present, tells me something about China in the '70s that John Chancellor and Walter Cronkite never did. When the mandarins of journalism were covering yet another meet-and-greet, she had her interpreter take her to the Number One Department Store, where the huge space was heated by a single coal stove, the most-desired items were bicycles and

often, "by viewer demand," entire episodes are devoted to it. If you have ever worked in an office, you know that there are happy, convivial moments in which a group of women from up and down the totem pole—the hard-ass senior executive, the Vietnamese woman who runs the copy room, the motherly secretary, the gorgeous young marketing director—converge at the coffee pot or in the lunch line and have a few minutes of chatter, during which their differences of class and age melt away. They instantly fall into certain companionable roles: the smartest one lends an educated perspective on a topic, the most outrageous one cracks the kind of jokes she wouldn't dare to if a man were around, the least intellectually secure one feels safe enough to ask the most rudimentary questions. So it goes during "Hot Topics," which for 11 years has presented female conversation as it has existed in offices and busy kitchens and village squares down through the ages.

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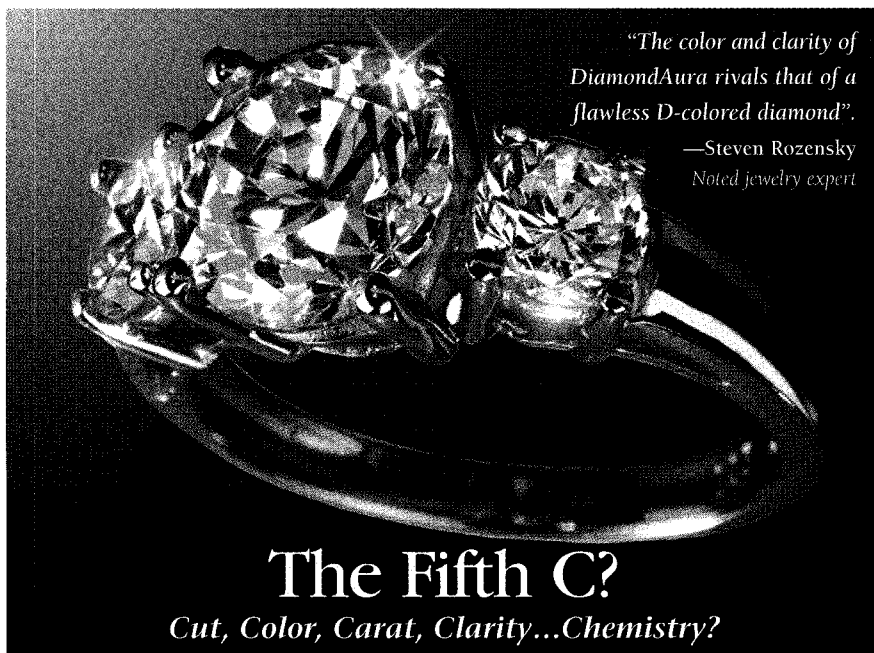
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Again and again throughout the volume, we are reminded that if there is one journalistic principle for which Barbara has no time at all, it is “conflict of interest.” Her closest friends seem to be the people whom she has interviewed and hopes to interview again. She nurtures them, she helps them, she loves them in the perfect and unconflicted way in which she was apparently never able to love her husbands or her only sibling. It was Barbara who stumbled upon a helplessly confused Julie Nixon Eisenhower at LaGuardia shortly after her father's resignation and helped her manage the first commercial flight she took by herself, and it was Barbara who threw the book party for Alan Greenspan's corker about the Fed. Once, on *The View*, when Michael Jackson was being tried for child molestation, the other ladies raged and cackled about the hell that would rain down on him if they ever got hold of him. But Barbara looked right into the camera, speaking neither to her colleagues nor to the viewers, but to an audience of one: “If I ever had the chance to talk to Michael,” she said—gently, kindly, the way all of us wish to be talked to when we are in serious trouble—“I would say to him, ‘Michael, what is your side of the story?’”

She was already working the story, already doing her thing—you could almost hear her assistant typing up the little personal note on the crested stationery: “Michael, I am always here for you.” This is how it must have begun with all of the people she has come to fall in love with, the murderers and the monsters, the celebrities whose loathsomeness radiates from the television screen. You had the sense, as she spoke, that if she ever slipped through the gates of Neverland, she would ride on the roller coaster and tour the private zoo and look carefully at the photographs that recorded a ruined, show-business childhood, and that by the time she climbed back into the purring limousine, even Michael Jackson would have entered the circle of enchantment. ▀

Caitlin Flanagan is the author of *To Hell With All That* (2006). She is at work on *Girl Land*, a book about the emotional life of pubescent girls.



BOOKS

A blinkered and besotted account of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential campaign succumbs to the erotic entanglements of biography.

Un Homme in Full

BY CRISTINA NEHRING

Looking over the headlines at a news kiosk in Paris this spring was like examining an array of autopsy reports and clinical case studies. "The Man With the Bags Under His Eyes" read *Le Point*, a right-wing weekly that might normally be presumed to bolster France's right-wing president. Nicolas Sarkozy's visage stared out sadly from behind the magazine's block letters. The newspaper *Libération* didn't even bother with a head shot; its cover simply sported a black silhouette to suggest a missing person: "French Seeking President," it announced ominously. The page-one editorial was titled

"Pathology." "When one judges a head of state, one generally asks, 'Is he a good president or a bad president?'" it began. "In the case of [Sarkozy,] one must ask, 'Is he a president?'"

Sarkozy's career, for the past several months, has been in a dizzying downward spiral. Every fresh magazine cover in la belle France, every weekly and every tabloid, seems to offer new evidence of his destruction. Even though—as many a Frenchman will tell you—he *runs* them all. Or at least his friends do. Arnaud Lagardère, a witness

at Sarkozy's second marriage, owns *Paris Match*; another pal, Serge Dassault, presides over *Le Figaro*; longtime associate

Martin Bouygues heads up the television channel *TF1*; and Vincent Bolloré—the notorious billionaire who outraged the country by lending Sarkozy a yacht for two and a half days after his year of presidential campaigning—

controls *Matin Plus*.

But with friends like these, you don't need enemies. "The Meltdown of Nicolas Sarkozy," flashes yet another headline.

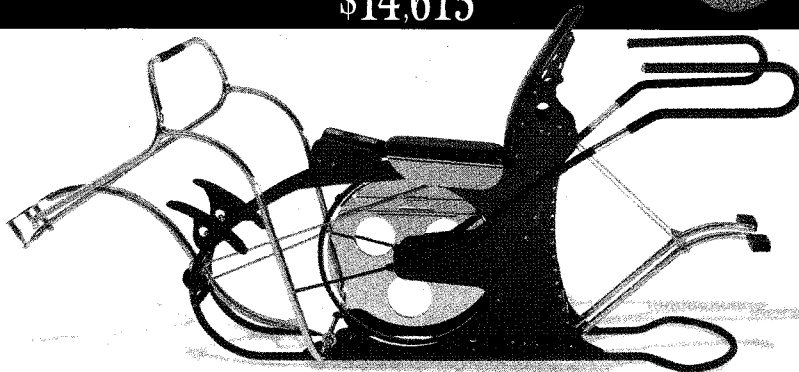
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"Should he resign?" puzzle the commentators. Many say yes. Sarkozy's approval ratings have plummeted to the 30th percentile. *Sarcophobia* has entered the French language and is here to stay. So has the acronym *TSS—Tout Sauf Sarkozy* ("Anything But Sarkozy").

What happened? How did this man—elected with an imposing margin over his attractive Socialist rival, Ségolène Royale, less than a year ago—sink so low so fast? He hasn't drawn corruption charges, as did his predecessor, Jacques Chirac. He hasn't started wars. He hasn't made even a dent in the economy. In fact, he hasn't had time to do much of anything yet. His problem is one of style, not substance.

As the newly translated book about him by the famous French playwright Yasmina Reza suggests, Sarkozy is a man at war with French niceties. He's a plain-spoken tough who dispenses insults more easily than he absorbs them, wishes to save France from apathy and irrelevance, suffers from an acute case of restless legs syndrome, and, in the end, possesses a heart of gold.

Reza followed Sarkozy for almost a year of presidential campaigning in 2006–2007, and she continually reprimands him for, of all things, his obsession with love. In a 30-page speech to the youth of France, he says "amour" 53 times, Reza laments. What's with this guy? Reza is an intellectual, a skeptic. Her literary works (among them the international theater triumph *Art*) teem with ironic asides and tragic heroes. Indeed, Sarkozy is the first nontragic hero to merit Reza's attention in some time, she confessed to a reporter after the publication of *Dawn, Dusk or Night: A Year With Nicolas Sarkozy*. She tries, in many ways, to turn him into a tragic hero. When he tells her, "Love is the only thing that matters" and "I can only love a landscape if I'm in it with someone I love," she mocks his naïveté. "A formula so vain," she sighs.

She hints broadly at his disappointment in private life. There is something to this disappointment. While Reza was writing *Dawn*, Sarkozy was campaign-

ing alone—his second wife, Cécilia, with whom he had officially reconciled after she'd left him to cohabit with a New York millionaire for several months, was conspicuously absent from his side and never found the time to vote for him in the final election. He was incessantly checking his cell phone for news from her. In fact, one of the book's most poignant moments comes when Reza describes Sarkozy, alone in a train compartment, opening and shutting his mobile phone: "I see him turning on his cell phone, turning it off, never going any further than the home page ... [his youngest son's] face appearing and disappearing dozens of times." He never makes a call; he only waits for one.

Reza accurately captures the vulnerability of this man, so infamous for arrogance, for bravado. Early on in her meetings with him, she notices that he has a slight limp. She notices that he is hardly taller than the 10-year-old son of a firefighter being honored on the anniversary of September 11. The president strikes her as a little boy. "When I tell his entourage that he looks like a child, I get stunned stares," she notes.

Sarkozy is indeed an arresting mix of strength and weakness. At times he seems very much the hero, the strongman, the larger-than-life action figure. He raised eyebrows throughout France in 1993 when, as mayor of the posh Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, he burst into a school held by a gunman and emerged carrying a young hostage in his arms. No other politician in recent history has risked his skin the way Sarkozy does. At other times, it is his frailty that attracts attention: his hair-trigger temper, his vulnerability to Cécilia, his physical tics.

I, too, noticed his limp when I arranged to join him—Reza-style—on a day trip to an apprentice-training outfit in the east of France where he hoped to promote a new Gallic work ethic. Arriving with a cavalry of handlers, he resembled a child star on a sitcom. For all his conscious swagger and broad, thrown-back shoulders, he wore soles several centimeters high. His voice, when he

answered journalists' questions, was almost preternaturally soft.

This was a man who only two weeks earlier had raised a furor in France for calling a farmworker a "poor slob" when he yelled "Keep your dirty hands off me!" as Sarkozy greeted supporters at an agricultural event. How unpresidential, raged the critics. Never mind that Sarkozy hadn't skipped a beat or broken his smile. Jacques Chirac, it was pointed out, had been similarly accosted once: "Asshole," a man yelled at him. Chirac stretched out his hand in greeting: "And *my* name," he said graciously, "is Chirac." That, many decided after years of reviling Chirac, was class. Sarkozy was a boor.

I had expected someone more aggressive. Standing half a meter from Sarkozy, I had to strain to hear him. The words he spoke were forceful: France, he declared, had come to punish its citizens for working. The brightest minds expended their talent figuring out how to do as little as possible. The state had to stop providing so many handouts and start creating more jobs. Yet even as I listened to Sarkozy speak, he reminded me of a mime—not only because of his quiet manner, but because of his expressive face. Sarkozy's mouth is huge, his eyebrows thick and dark, as though splashed on with an oversize brush. His smile and frown are theatrical. The thick-soled shoes make his feet look big. There is something clownish, something Marcel Marceau-like, something cartoonish but, at the same time, imposing about the man.

To be loved, a man must have in his face something to pity and something to admire, says Stendhal. It is probably hard to spend a whole year writing about a public figure—a figure whose schedule becomes your schedule, whose movements become your movements, whose successes become your successes—without falling a little bit in love with him, and Reza hints (both in her book and elsewhere) that this is exactly what happened to her.

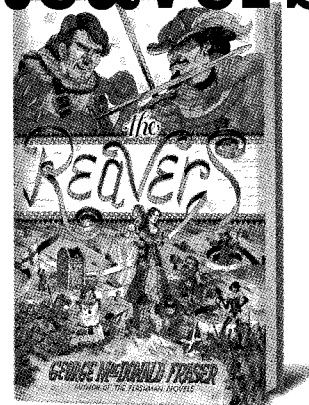
In many ways, her narrative reads like a long-running tale of foreplay. Reza is pulsingly alive to Sarkozy's moods, his foibles, his ambiguities. Few observers of

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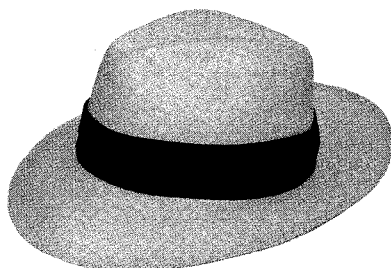
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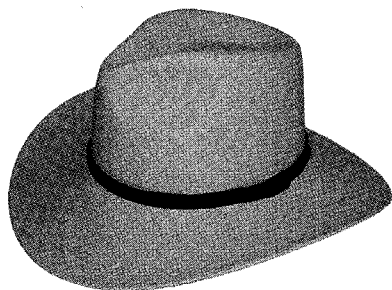
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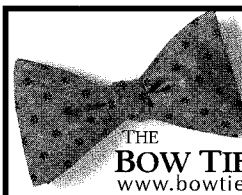
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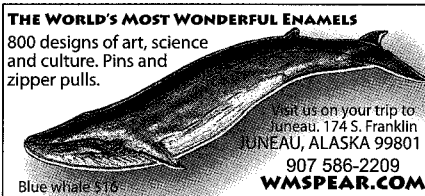
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Sarkozy have been more finely attuned to his outbreaks of megalomania and anger, to his one-on-one combat with the angel of time. Reza perceives his restlessness with the attention of a woman enamored; she notices his nervous movements, his impatience with people's questions and reports, his fear of letting life slip through his fingers. "They brutally tell you it's too early [to act]," Sarkozy tells her at one juncture. But "then, no less brutally, they tell you it's too late. The advice always adds up to: not right now." Rather than miss the right moment, Sarkozy barely shuts an eye. He plunges into every fray. He is in perpetual motion. As a result, he sometimes resembles "a fox terrier running everywhere, barking." Other times, he evokes Macbeth—edgy, driven, tortured, noble.

But Reza's tale also acquires an airless quality, a narrative claustrophobia. One senses that she is waiting, rapt, for Sarkozy to make a move on her. Their circular conversations about love; their stagey disagreements; their implicit superiority over surrounding journalists and administrators and colleagues. Reza's frustration—that her subject never, in fact, makes his move—becomes the frustration of the book. Tirelessly, she drops hints that she is engaged in a sexual waltz with the man who will be president: she, the great writer, he the great politician—two *Übermenschen* in a state of attraction.

Warned by her artsy friends not to meddle with political men because "they are stronger than us," she responds archly, flirtatiously: "I don't believe [Sarkozy] is stronger than I." A photo taken of Reza and Sarkozy shows her, arms akimbo, bosom thrust toward his chin, staring him felinely in the face. He smiles at her like a gentleman chagrined, flattered, compromised.

In a particularly maddening scene toward the end of the book, Sarkozy has just won the presidential election and Reza has announced with mysterious abruptness that she will cease to follow him. He summons her to his new office in the Élysée. "I could say, Why did you want to see me, but I don't say it. He could say, Why do you want to stop

[accompanying me], but he doesn't say it. What for? We know the answers," she says coyly, "and any kind of explanation would be demeaning." The new leader and the longtime celebrity contemplate each other in charged silence. They contrive small talk. It is tense. But it is also—and this is the problem with much of the book—essentially dull.

Just as the reader is about to scream with exasperation, comes the coup de théâtre. Sarkozy stands up. He moves across the room. We can feel Reza's heart stop. And then he picks up ... a table. He picks up a small table by the window and carries it to the other side of the room. He sets it down next to the wall. And that's it. He sits back down again.

Sarkozy can jog like Rocky and flirt like Alfred de Musset. He met his second wife when he presided over her marriage to another man.

"That's crazy what you just did," Reza says, after a beat. "You think so?" asks the president.

It's as close to a declaration of love as Reza gets in this book. And since such a declaration is so clearly the main point of the whole exercise, its absence makes for a memoir that is irksome, desk-pounding, futile-feeling.

It also makes for a memoir that is unfair. For Reza ends up slightly bitter about her resistant subject. "Did he attempt to seduce you?" a brazen French reporter asked her after the book's publication in Paris. "No," she said. And then: "Come to think of it, it is almost insulting to spend a year with a man without his even trying to seduce you." Ironic? We are probably supposed to think so. But in irony lies truth—especially for a writer like Yasmina Reza. "Were you attracted to him?" pursued the reporter. After complimenting her interlocutor on the "audacity" of the question (thus admitting that he was on the right track), Reza told a lie as bold as it was pompous:

"I would like to respond to that question impersonally," she said. Sarkozy "is

one of those men who ... are very desirous ... [but who] were one day forced to stop diversifying [this desire]." It is "a form of desiccation," she explained: "Beings who once possessed the capacity to move life in many different directions become one-tracked." In other words, where Sarkozy once would have allowed his life force to spill into the seduction of Yasmina Reza, he has now truncated it so violently that it suffices only, alas, to "seduce France."

Really? Is this the man she needed for nearly 200 pages about his full-blooded faith in love; the man who, it should be mentioned, himself wrote a memoir, in 2006, *Testimony*, whose most-cited passages are declarations

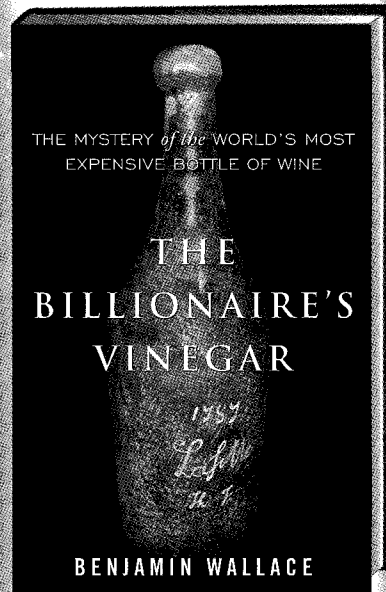
of passion for Cécilia? This man is now incapable of "diversifying" his "desire"? In Reza's offended soul, he has become a political machine, a windup toy that buzzes off into political Neverland without so much as pausing over the flowers on the way.

If Reza is a flower, Sarkozy may in fact have resisted alighting upon her petals. But to blame this on his defects of character rather than on, for example, his loyalty (however unreciprocated) to his wife—or indeed on his indifference to Reza—seems to signal a fundamental dishonesty and vindictiveness on Reza's part.

"Anyway, you'll reinvent him," said a friend of Reza's upon hearing that she would be writing about Sarkozy. And so she has. She has captured certain aspects of him in glinting detail; others she has altered, darkened, and altogether misunderstood.

Whatever else this hurried, harried president is, he is large; he contains multitudes. He can divorce a woman he begged endlessly to take him back and

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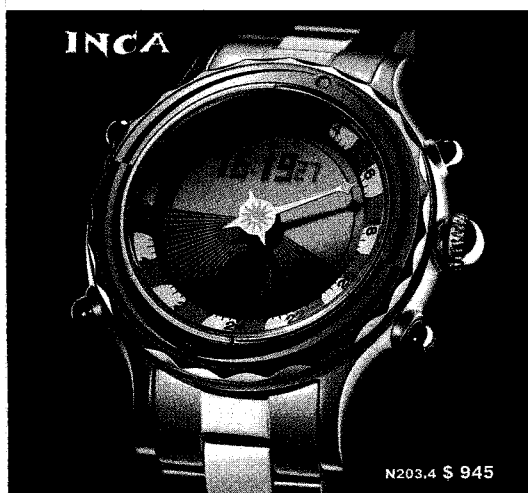


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The last thing this man is is narrow or “desiccated.” Or predictable. Despite his current trials, his detractors are holding their breath. I talked in March with a spokesman for Paris’s left-wing mayor, Bertrand Delanoë—himself a presidential hopeful for 2012. It was the middle of the “meltdown” phase of media coverage of Sarkozy. “Don’t bury him yet,” my friend said. “He is like Lazarus. If people are disappointed in him, it is first and foremost because he raised such high expectations.”

Sarkozy struck people as a man of his word. Whereas other candidates for public office make their promises with a certain perfunctoriness, Sarkozy looked his electors in the eye: “Everything I have spoken, I will perform,” he said fiercely. “I will scrupulously adhere to my promises and to my word.”

In many ways, he has done just that. Even leftist media watchdogs dedicated to charting his downfall admit it. Rue89, a Web site that vowed to monitor the new president for the five years of his term and demonstrate how easily he forgot his oaths, has, it seems, thrown in the towel. Its “Sarkoscope” registers that after a few months in office, Sarkozy has successfully instituted (or is in the midst of instituting) eight of the 10 specific policy reforms he had announced on the campaign trail.

From simplification of the European Union’s clunky internal procedures and mandatory penalties for repeat criminal offenders to overhauls of the country’s 35-hour work week (henceforth, French employees can work overtime

without being punished for it), Sarkozy has delivered what he promised. The operators of the Sarkoscope can resume their day jobs.

Still. The president didn’t just make a beeline for target statistics. He also, and more importantly, “diversified his desire.” He dove ardently into education reform (dispatching a 30-odd-page tract to surprised school authorities), into the urgency of religious respect, into the rights of crime victims, into debates about the Shoah. He made rousing speeches about France’s need for “rupture” with its past. As he told audiences toward the end of last year:

I still remember some of my friends trembling ... because I used the word *rupture*. ‘It’s a mistake,’ they said to me. *Change* would be better. In other words, the smell of rupture without the rupture. But I do not fear the word *rupture*—rupture with habits of thought, with ideas, with behaviors of the past that have prevented us from advancing, from grasping the future between our two arms ... I want rupture with intellectual conformity ... I want rupture with half-heartedness, I want rupture with conservatism, I want rupture with immobility. This rupture I believe necessary. This rupture I have betrothed myself to. This rupture the French people have approved. This rupture I will perform.

Even as he hailed political rupture, Sarkozy confronted personal rupture: he ended one marriage and celebrated another. It took him no more than three months.

He still has four years to change the country he adores, the country his Hungarian father folded fast into his heart. So the poor slob at the farming event oughtn’t write him off just yet. Nor should the European media, the next American president, or the previous French one. Neither, finally, should the acclaimed playwright who followed him. Yasmina Reza may not think Nicolas Sarkozy is stronger than she is. But guess what, Ms. Reza: he is. ▀

Cristina Nehring lives in Paris. Her book, *A Vindication of Love: Reclaiming Romance for the 21st Century*, will be published by HarperCollins early next year.



BOOKS

The enduring, untamable appeal of Saki's short stories

Where the Wild Things Are

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

At the age of 15, Noël Coward was staying in an English country house and found a copy of *Beasts and Super-Beasts* on a table: "I took it up to my bedroom, opened it casually and was unable to go to sleep until I had finished it." I had a similar experience at about the same age, and I agree with Coward that H. H. Munro—or "Saki," the author of the book in question—is among those few writers, inspirational when read at an early age, who definitely retain their magic when revisited decades later. I have the impression that Saki is not very much appreciated in the United States. Good. That means I can put into my debt many of you who are reading these words. Go and get an edition of this Edwardian master of the short story. Begin with, say, "Sredni Vashtar" or "The Lumber-Room" or "The Open Window." Then see whether you can put the book down.

The spellbinding quality of the stories is almost too easy to analyze and looks mawkish when set down in plain words, because Saki's great gift was being able to write about children and animals. But consider: How many authors have ever been able to pull off these most difficult of tricks? Kipling, for sure, but then, Kipling would not have been able to render the languid young princes of the drawing room, such as the exquisite Clovis Sangrail, with whom Saki peopled so many a scene. The character of these lethal Narcissi is well netted in a phrase coined by Sandie Byrne, who refers to them as "feral epebes."

If you want to incubate an author who will show lifelong sympathy for children and animals, it seems best to sequester him at an early age and then subject him

to a long regime of domestic torture. This was the formula that worked so well for Kipling, as evidenced in his frightening autobiographical story, "Baa Baa, Black Sheep," and it is almost uncanny to see how closely Saki's early life followed the same course. Abandoned to the care of cold and neurotic aunts in England while his father performed colonial duties in

India, he and his siblings had to learn how to do without affection, and how to resist and outpoint adult callousness and stupidity. But without those terrible women—and the villains in Saki's gem-like

tales are almost always female—we might not have had the most-fearsome aunts in fiction, outdoing even Wodehouse's Aunt Agatha or Wilde's Lady Bracknell.

Wodehouse happily admitted to being influenced by Saki, and it would

THE
UNBEARABLE
SAKI
by Sandie Byrne
Oxford

be interesting to know to what extent Saki was himself influenced by Wilde. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that he was, because some of his epigrams ("Beauty is only sin deep") betray an obvious indebtedness, and one ("To lose an hotel and a cake of soap in one afternoon suggests willful carelessness") is an almost direct appropriation from *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But in that epoch, Wilde's name lay under a ban, and Saki would have been well advised to not challenge the unstated rules that underlay that prohibition. (I find the speculation about his own homosexuality pointless because there is nothing about which to speculate: he was self-evidently homosexual and, just as obviously, deeply repressed.)

As is by no means uncommon in such cases, Saki was of the extreme right, and even an admirer must concede that some of his witticisms were rather labored and contrived as a consequence. Several of his less amusing stories are devoted to ridicule of the women's suffrage movement, which was cresting during his heyday, while a persistent subtext of his work is a satirical teasing of his contemporary and *bête noire*, the ponderously socialistic Bernard Shaw ("Sherard Blaw, the dramatist who had discovered himself, and who had given so ungrudgingly of his discovery to the world"). And, like another of his great contemporaries, Arthur Balfour, future author of a famous Declaration, Saki harbored a suspicion of Jews. One of his feral ephebes, Reginald, tells a duchess while chatting at the theater that what she terms "the great Anglo-Saxon empire" is, in fact, "rapidly becoming a suburb of Jerusalem."

That same empire, and its survival, was at the center of the contradictions in Saki's personality. Byrne's insightful and sprightly book makes plain that his affectless poseurs and dandies may have reflected one half of the man, just as his repeated portrayals of lithe and lissome and amoral young men must have expressed his banked-down yearnings. But this other hemisphere of his character also admired wildness and risk

and cruelty and warfare, and associated the concepts of empire and nation with manly virtue.

This point can be reinforced by some thoughts on his choice of *nom de plume*. I had not known, until I read Byrne's book, that there was any doubt about the provenance of this. She mentions almost casually that one of his obituarists claimed it was a shortened form of "Nagasaki," which seems unintelligible in more ways than one. Enormously more probable, given Munro's often expressed admiration for FitzGerald's version of Omar Khayyám, is that he saw himself in the cupbearer of the Rubáiyát:

And fear not lest Existence closing
your
Account, and mine, should know the
like no more;
The Eternal Sáki from that Bowl has
pour'd
Millions of Bubbles like us, and will
pour.

When You and I behind the Veil are
past,
Oh, but the long, long while the
World shall last,
Which of our Coming and Departure
heeds
As the Sea's self should heed a pebble-
cast.

In a story called "The East Wing," a lazy young male creature named Lucien Wattleskeat expresses something of the same thought—not exempting the bubble metaphor—but with more focus on the paradoxical importance of his own ephemerality:

I don't think I can risk my life to save someone I've never met or even heard about. You see, my life is not only wonderful and beautiful to myself, but if my life goes, nothing else really matters—to me ... Eva might be snatched from the flames and live to be the grandmother of brilliant and charming men and women, but as far as I should be concerned she and they would no more exist than a vanished puff of cigarette smoke or a dissolved soda-water bubble.

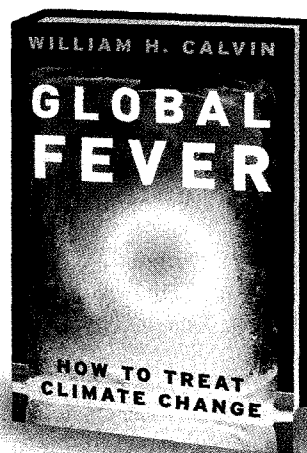
I think this clears up any dispute about the source of the pseudonym (which often appeared on book jackets

alongside his true name), and I pause to note that Lucien Wattleskeat is a poor register of Saki's generally brilliant and somewhat Wildean ability to devise memorable names. Like Wilde (and like Anthony Powell later on), he made good use of the atlas of Britain and Ireland to come up with surnames and titles that were at once believable and eccentric. Many of these were from his beloved West Country (Yeovil, Honiton, Cullompton), but he ranged far and wide in choosing names like Courtenay Youghal for a smoothly accomplished politician and, in a moment of sheer brilliance, Tobermory for one of his most outstanding characters, the house cat who learns to speak English (and also to eavesdrop). Of his selecting Clovis as the model par excellence of his breed of bored and elegant young men, I have heard it suggested that it was because he was so appallingly Frank.

Creatures that essentially can never be tamed—felines and wolves pre-eminently—were Saki's emotional favorites. In his best-known novella, *The Unbearable Bassington*, which contains in the figure of Comus Bassington one of the two most obviously homoerotic of his protagonists (the other being the boy-werewolf Gabriel-Ernest in the story of the same name), the hero is a man named Tom Keriway, whose daredevil nature is summed up in the echoing phrase "a man that wolves have sniffed at." But Keriway has become sickly and nearly destitute, and morosely recalls an observation about a crippled wild crane that became domesticated in a German park: "It was lame, that was why it was tame."

When he was in his early 40s, Saki began to throw off some of the languor and ennui with which he had invested so many of his scenes and characters, and became extremely exercised about the empire that he had quite often lampooned. Perhaps as a result of his experiences in Russia and the Balkans as a correspondent for a High Tory newspaper, he emitted grave warnings about an imminent German invasion and even wrote an alarmist novel—*When William*

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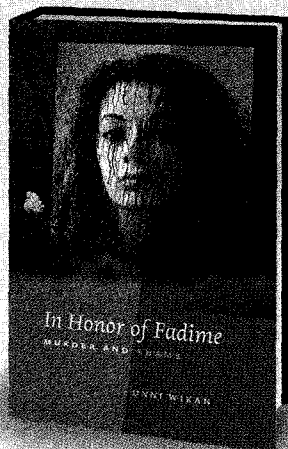
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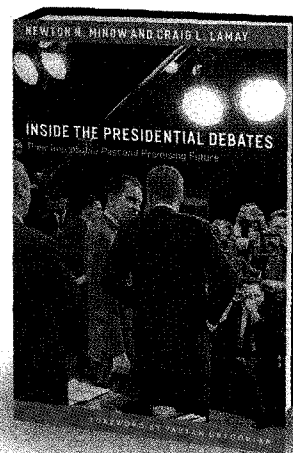
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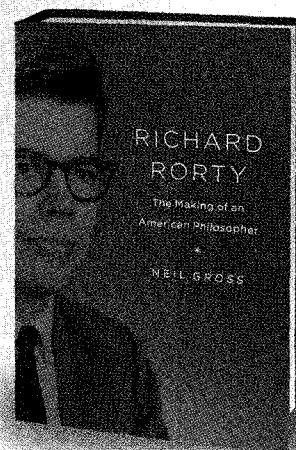
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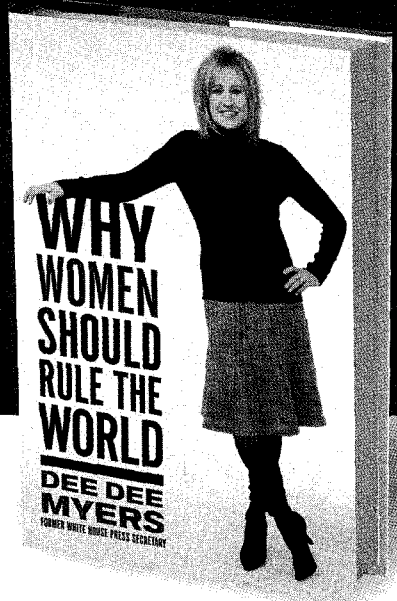
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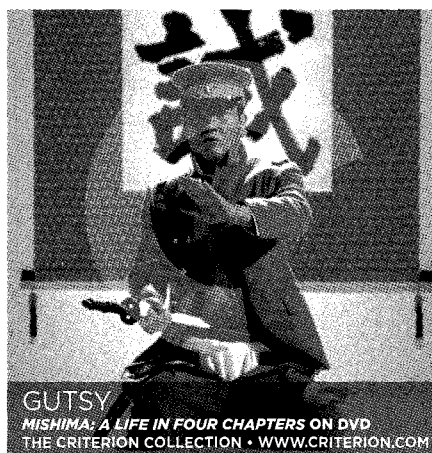
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Came—about how British life might feel under the Prussian heel of Kaiser Wilhelm. Its pages treat almost exclusively the outrage and dispossession that might be experienced by the humiliated gentry. (I can think of only one Saki tale that takes the side of egalitarianism or that views society from the perspective of the gutter rather than the balcony or the verandah, and that is the lovely and vindictive *Morlova*, in which a couple of proletarian children witness a delicious piece of malice and spite being inflicted on a grown-up by a hideous youngster of the upper crust.)

But in 1914, Saki surprised all his elite admirers. His reasons for insisting on signing up for the trenches, when he was easily old enough to evade that fate, were almost comically reactionary. Enraged by the antimilitarist left that thought socialism preferable to world war, he argued in effect that even world war was preferable to socialism. Yet he declined any offer of an officer's commission, insisted on serving in the ranks, appeared to forget all his previous affections about hollandaise dressing and the loving preparations of wine and cheese, and was so reduced by front-line conditions of wounds and illness that he grew a moustache to conceal the loss of most of his top teeth. He carried on writing, though chiefly about the interesting survival of wildlife in the no-man's-land of the Western Front, and he repeatedly sought positions on the front line. In November 1916, near the village of Beaumont-Hamel on the river Somme, he found what it is quite thinkable that he had been looking for all along. On the verge of a crater, during an interval of combat, he was heard to shout "Put that bloody cigarette out!" before succumbing to the bullet of a German sniper who had been trained to look for such tell-tale signals. In that "vanished puff of cigarette smoke" or, if you prefer, his image of a dissolved bubble of effervescence, there died someone who had finally come to decide that other people were worth fighting for after all. ▀

Christopher Hitchens is an *Atlantic* contributing editor and a *Vanity Fair* columnist.



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BOOKS

A guide to additional releases

COVER to COVER

BIOGRAPHY and MEMOIR



Oakland, Jack London, and Me

by Eric Miles Williamson
(Texas Review Press)

It's not just because both writers are from the slums of Oakland, California, that Williamson is such a passionate advocate for London. His white-hot scorn for literary fashion and indeed for most conventional criticism lights up nearly every sentence here. London managed to be both a socialist and a fascist, both a fervent champion of the oppressed and a militant racist, and Williamson revels in his hero's contradictions. More than that, he identifies with London to a sometimes alarming extent, making this one of the least politically correct texts of our time. It's also one of the best routes to understanding how London came by his extreme views (he was a writer who knew about injustice and exposed it even as he sometimes typified it), perhaps because Williamson doesn't shy away from confronting their rebarbateness.

Frank Lloyd Wright in New York

by Jane King Hession and Debra Pickrel
(Gibbs Smith)

The Frank Lloyd Wright who emerges as the bon vivant starchitect of this Manhattan tale retains the pluck of the upstart Prairie School designer, only with a more obsessive bent. The authors cast the Guggenheim as Wright's foil: the museum-as-ramp that became both the aesthetic driving force of his life and a symbol of his relationship with the city, something welcoming and discomfiting all at once. In near-breathless depictions, Wright's live-in suite at the Plaza Hotel takes form as a veritable Algonquin Round Table in the sky, a whirligig of visiting celebrities, lawyers, scholars, and architects that mirrored the excitement of the museum being erected on the ground below.

Sigmund Romberg

by William A. Everett (Yale)

Born in Hungary in 1887, Romberg served his musical apprenticeship in Vienna, where Johann Strauss Jr. and Franz Lehár had perfected the operetta. In 1924 he scored a huge hit on Broadway with *The Student Prince*, and he later collaborated with Oscar Hammerstein on such classics as *The Desert Song*, which modernized operetta. Although Romberg lived on into the great age of American musical comedy—which his music, especially that written with Hammerstein's lyrics, had helped create—he remained too wedded to operetta to make the transition himself. Still, his music continued to be immensely popular onstage and on the radio even after his death, in 1951. Everett, a musicologist and music historian, is an authoritative guide to this pivotal figure in American musical theater.

Marie-Thérèse, Child of Terror: The Fate of Marie Antoinette's Daughter

by Susan Nagel (Bloomsbury)

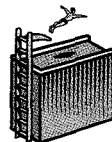
Unlike her mother, the subject of so much historical attention, Marie-Thérèse, the sole survivor of her nuclear family (Robespierre intervened to forestall her execution), has been neglected by posterity. If she's remembered at all, it's as a figure typical of the restored Bourbons, who had famously forgotten nothing and learned nothing. In this biography, the account of what she endured is harrowing, still more so that of her witnessing the abuse and slow torture-murder of her brother, the hapless dauphin. Contrary to received wisdom, the woman in these pages emerges, after much evidence cited, as a veritable prototype of saintly Catholic forgiveness.

FICTION

The Silver Swan

by Benjamin Black (Holt)

Who would have thought that the noir crime novel of 1940s Los Angeles would



transplant so organically to 1950s Dublin? It's not just the tough-but-tender protagonist, the brutal milieu, and the hard-boiled dames—there's something about the murky atmosphere of that damp, decaying city that lets it all flourish. The Irish writer and critic John Banville, who won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Sea*, has chosen to write the thrillers featuring his aptly named investigative pathologist, Quirke, under a pseudonym that itself pays homage to the genre. This is a book to savor for its innumerable stylistic grace notes and literary echoes of Joyce's Dublin, all of which make it as unmistakably Irish as those 1940s classics are indelibly American.

HISTORY



Blood Sport: Hunting in Britain Since 1066

by Emma Griffin (Yale)

In 2004, when Tony Blair's government finally succeeded in making good on its 1997 campaign promise to ban foxhunting, people outside the U.K. had a hard time understanding the passions that had been stirred up during those seven years. This penetrating study of just how integral blood sports have been in the national consciousness helps make sense of that tumult. Understandably, Griffin focuses on foxhunting through the ages, and she ends with an account of how "the view that there might be something wrong in making sport out of killing animals steadily drifted from the fringes to the mainstream throughout the twentieth century." That is, most Britons came to share Oscar Wilde's dismissive view of the sport as "the pursuit of the inedible by the unspeakable."

The World on Fire: 1919 and the Battle With Bolshevism by Anthony Read (Norton)

This is an exhaustive and dramatic account of what Churchill memorably

lamented as "the failure to strangle Bolshevism at its birth." It was not for want of trying. Still reeling from the First World War, the Allied leaders devoted a surprising amount of energy—at Versailles and elsewhere—to trying to snuff out this new threat. The book's chief virtue is to show the global nature of the sudden Bolshevik eruption. Well-known incidents such as the bombing of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's house in Washington and assassinations in Berlin take their place alongside less-publicized revolutionary activities in Belfast, Johannesburg, New South Wales(!), and Estonia. Given the ferocity and hydra-headedness of the phenomenon Read describes, its ascendancy in so few places suggests that all those anti-Red efforts were not quite for naught.

The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents—The Definitive Edition, Collected Works of F. A. Hayek
by F. A. Hayek, edited by Bruce Caldwell (Chicago)

First published in 1944, a year in which a planned economy was the norm in democracies as well as in collectivist states, Hayek's denunciation of state control over the means of production was breathtakingly audacious. Yet his book (reissued here in its original U.S. edition, with various forewords to later editions) turned out to be perhaps the most important intellectual salvo in the battle that not only brought about the end of Communism but also eviscerated the elements of socialism that had transformed nominally capitalist economies into mixed ones. Through such influence and its ripple effects, this seminal text may well be said to have helped foster today's triumphant global capitalism.

Prague in Danger: The Years of German Occupation, 1939–45
by Peter Demetz (FSG)

Who remembers that for six terrible years, from 1939 to 1945, Prague became one of the crown jewels of the German Reich—not just another occupied European city? Demetz, a longtime Yale professor of German and comparative literature, was actually there as a young man, and here he blends memory with meticulous scholarship to produce a portrait of this strange episode in the history of one of Europe's most vibrant

and beautiful places. A new look into a neglected corner of life in the Third Reich, this book—which elucidates the extraordinary hubbub of activity in theaters, film studios, and other artistic realms—reminds us that even in the darkest periods of history, there are unexpected shafts of light.

SOCIETY and CULTURE



Boxing: A Cultural History
by Kasia Boddy (*Reaktion/University of Chicago*)

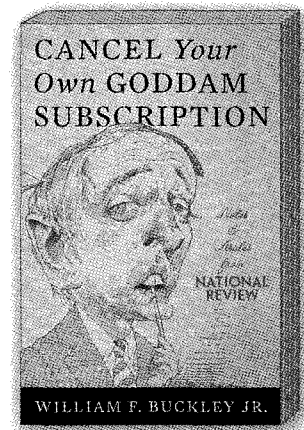
The public has soured of late on the sweet science, and with ample reason: profit has pummeled pride, power-punches have given way to pitter-patters, and the whole bloody spectacle has been transformed—broodingly, boringly—from theatrical ritual to theater of the absurd. But before its recent devolution, boxing was the ultimate reductive contest ("utterly Manichean," in the words of Camus), a pure, bruising tradition dating from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia and fairly dripping with oppositional symbolism. Boddy, a British academic, knows this better than most and intelligently takes up—via art, literature, film, and the media—the many issues that have historically veined the sport: "nationality, class, race, ethnicity, religion, politics, and different versions of masculinity," plus dialectics like "brawn versus brains, boastfulness versus modesty, youth versus experience." Her reach is considerable, but so is her grasp. The result is a sweeping critical history and a perfect power-to-weight ratio.

The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and *Les Misérables*

by Mario Vargas Llosa, translated by John King (Princeton)

Who would have associated Vargas Llosa, that champion of free-market capitalism and fan of Thatcherite politics, with one of the formative literary texts of the permanent left? Yet this passionately argued book makes clear that the Peruvian writer is a utopian at heart. He extols *Les Misérables* as "one of the works that has been most influential in making so many men and women of all languages and cultures desire a more just, rational, and beautiful world than the one they live in."

**THE LAST WORD...
From William F. Buckley Jr.**

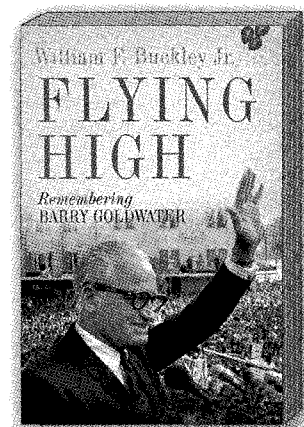


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Notes & Asides from *National Review*

"Given Mr. Buckley's unrelieved involvement in the public affairs of his time, the book stands as a kind of informal intellectual history of the final third of the 20th century."

—WALL STREET JOURNAL



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—WILLIAM KRISTOL

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ombrageaient shaded
tentures wall covering
Gaius Mucius Sosovola legendary Roman hero who entered
Etruscan camp and tried to assassinate King Porsenna during the
latter's siege of Rome. Mucius was captured but showed his
courage and disdain for torture by putting his right hand into the
fire. Porsenna was so impressed, he released Mucius, who was
known thereafter as *roscio*, or "the left-handed one."
Tarquin le Superbe seventh king of Rome who extended his
dominion over all of Latium and incorporated cities heretofore
resistant to Rome's supremacy
for intérieur deep in (his) heart
Cependant However
cavalier knight (in chess)
fou bishop (in chess)
assombri here: gloomy
à l'étage upstairs
gagna here: accessed
clignotaient were twinkling
feux d'un port harbour lights
souveraine all powerful
surplombaient were hanging over
berge bank
canot dinghy
casquette cap
faisaient face were facing
à hauteur at the level
piquetèrent droit vers here: headed straight for
étendue plate flat expanse
semée strewn
saules willows
échoués run aground
au gré des crues with the ebb and flow
rase short (grass)
sable sand
épaves wrecks
déplurent spread out
nattes mats

54

Max s'il était bien sage, pour rejoindre sous les grands a
ombrageaient ces tentures Numa Pompilius, Mucius
Tarquin le Superbe? Max... ou Vincent? Pour la premi
trouvait du charme à cet autre prénom, et dans son fo
l'accepta.

Cependant Alban se disputait avec Isabelle à propos d
qu'elle aurait dû jouer à la place du fou. La partie toure
déclara qu'elle avait sommeil et Alban, le visage asso
en disant qu'ils devaient tous aller dormir, s'ils voula
journée du lendemain sur leur lit.

Max-Vincent les accompagna à l'étage. Ils lui s
bonsoir. Ses hôtes habitaient chacun leur chambre e
portes furent refermées, il gagna la sienne. Par la fen
respirait l'odeur du fleuve. Au loin, sur l'autre riv
d'un village clignotaient dans la nuit sans lune,
feux d'un port.

En cette fin de matinée la chaleur était souve
les magnôhas dans le parc du château; leurs branch
la berge, formant une voûte que n'agitaient aucu
canot à moteur. Alban, coiffe d'une vieille cas
mauveuse, Isabelle et Vincent lui faisaient f
raînaient et se remettaient tout à tour Her
viguer
abandon

C'était
des can
certain
débou
leur s
le sh
iel f
cer

incontro encounter, meeting
O meglio Or rather
nappure not even
inquieta restless
mite mild

panchina bench
forsizia forsythia
aiuole flower beds
la lito per the quarrel over

Quand'è stata? When was it?
bronchite bronchitis
stentava ad andarsene I couldn't shake (literally: was going

away with difficulty)
vorticavano they were whirling about

Affacciandomi alla finestra Looking out the window
tristezza sadness
cupo dark, overcast

Ti ho raggiunta I caught up with you, I found you
distesa stretched out
cuffie headphones

rastrillare rake
alzato le spalle shrugged your shoulders
E perché mai? Why bother?

raccoglie picks them up
marcio to rot
alleata ally

incrollabili leggi immutable laws
domesticata tamed
sottile looks like, resembles

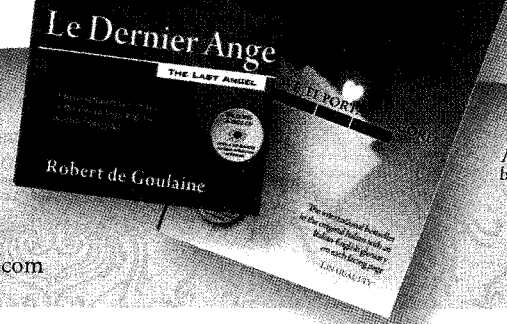
20 novembre

Di nuovo qui, terzo giorno del nost
quarto giorno e terzo incontro. Ieri er
sono riuscita a scrivere niente e neppure
inquieta e non sapendo cosa fare ho gir
casa e il giardino. L'aria era abbastanza m
mi sono seduta sulla panchina accanto
a me il prato e le aiuole erano nel pit
Guardandole mi è venuta in mente la line
Quand'è stata? L'anno scorso? Due an
una bronchite che stentava ad andars
già tutte sull'erba, vorticavano di qua e
vento. Affacciandomi alla finestra mi era
tristezza, il cielo era cupo, c'era una gran
fuori. Ti ho raggiunta in camera, suavi di
le cuffie attaccate alle orecchie. Ti ho chi
rastrillare le foglie. Per farmi sentire ho
frase diverse volte con voce sempre più fo
spalle dicendo: «E perché mai? In natura nes
stanno lì a marcire e va bene così». La nat
era la tua grande alleata, riuscivi a giustifica
le sue incrollabili leggi. Invece di spiegar
è una natura addomesticata, una natura-can
sommiglia di più al suo padrone e che proprio
bisogno di continue attenzioni, mi sono ritira
aggiungere altro. Poco dopo, quando mi sei pas
andare a mangiare qualcosa dal frigo hai visto c
non ci hai fatto caso. Solo all'ora di cena qua
39

French Selection: *Le Dernier Ange*
by Robert de Goulaïne



Laura K. Lawless, French guide | about.com



Italian Selection: *Va dove ti porta il Cuore*
by Susanna Tamaro

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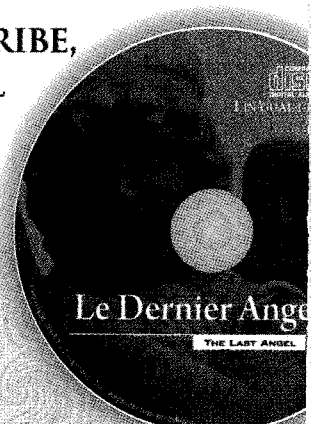


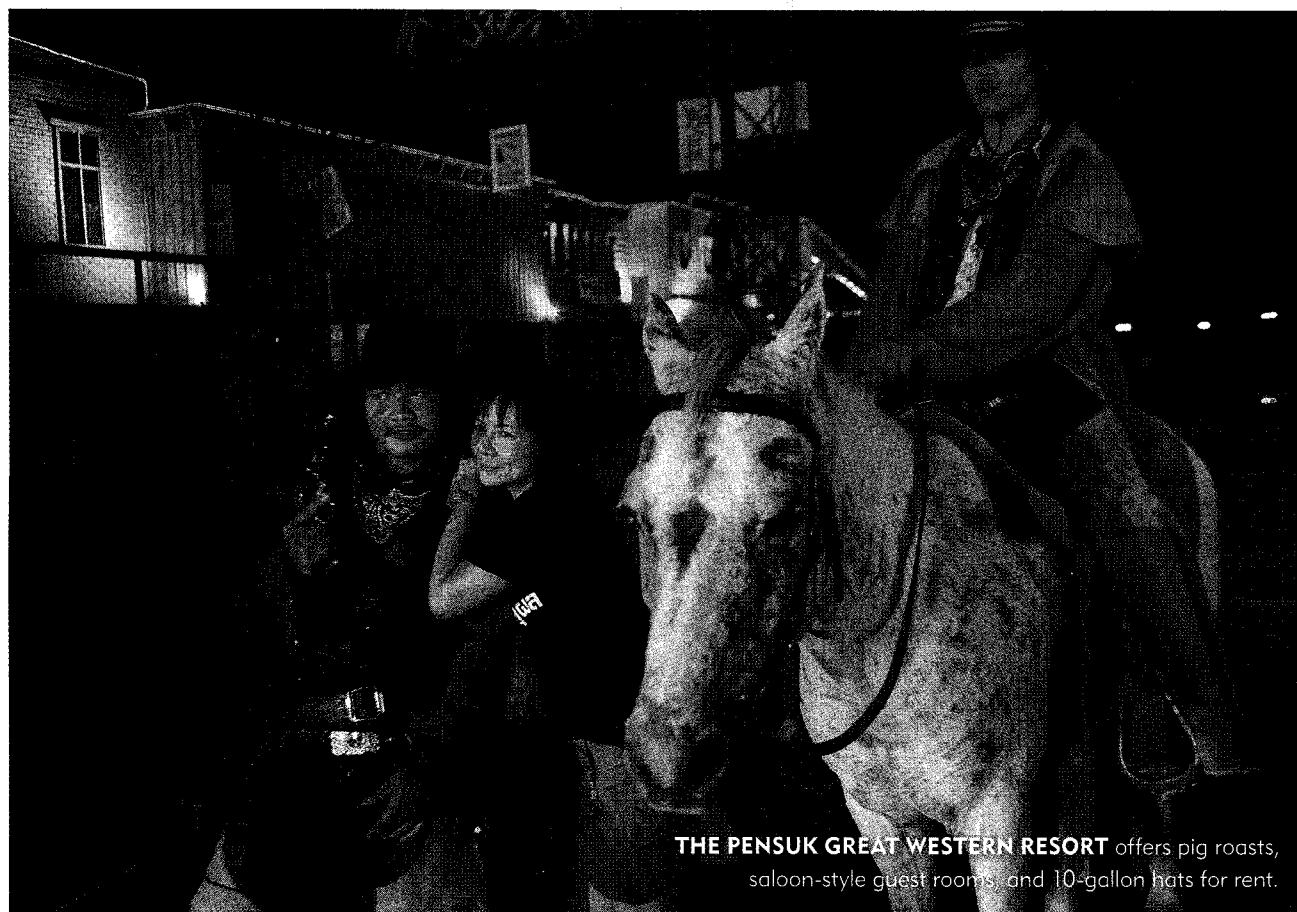
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THE PENSUK GREAT WESTERN RESORT offers pig roasts, saloon-style guest rooms, and 10-gallon hats for rent.

TRAVELS

A few hours northeast of Bangkok, American-style cowboy culture thrives.

Thai Noon

BY JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

It's 7:30 on a humid April evening, and the line dancing has begun. Women in cowgirl dresses sway to the music, mouthing the words as they step backward and forward in unison on the stage. After a while they sit down, and I hear whinnying in the distance. A group of horsemen in chaps and buckskin coats thunders up atop black-and-white steeds. Surrounded by guests in bolo ties, I watch, transfixed. It's my first evening at the Pensuk Great Western Resort—a 40-acre spread in the heart of Southeast Asia. The “cowgirls” are graceful Thai women, the “cowboys” slight, lithe Thai men.

Nearing the stage, the cowboys perform their version of a Western-movie brawl, alternately pretending to drunkenly slug their buddies and saluting each other with a *wai*, the reverential bow made with hands clasped together. Instead of ending in a shootout, the brawl concludes in the typical let's-all-get-along Thai fashion, with everyone—the cowgirls and cowboys, the high-society Thai women and foreign tourists in the audience—dancing together on the stage.

“Of course we built the resort here,” one of Pensuk’s managers tells me the

next day, as I struggle to understand how Texas landed in the Thai countryside. “This is where the cowboys are.” Thailand’s northeast, the center of the country’s cattle industry, has long been home to Wild West fans. During the Vietnam war, GIs in Thailand (where the U.S. had enormous air bases) brought their Clint Eastwood photos, Ennio Morricone albums, and taste for steak and

MORE ON THEATLANTIC.COM
For a slideshow about Thailand’s cowboy culture, narrated by Joshua Kurlantzick, visit www.theatlantic.com/multimedia.

THE TRAVEL ADVISORY

Pensuk Great Western Resort (pensuk.com; 011-662-530-7111), probably the best—and the weirdest—place to sample Thailand's cowboy culture, is about four hours northeast of Bangkok by car. The highway is wide and well paved, and there are interesting stops along the way. Reservations are a good idea, but getting them may take some persistence: Pensuk's staff tends to be disorganized and can be hard to track down. Rooms start at about \$40 a night.

Yana Farm (yanafarm.com) and **Farm Chokchai** (farmchokchai.com/en/chokchai_main.asp), both on the way from Bangkok to Pensuk, are worth a visit. Yana lies in the heart of Thailand's cattle country, where you'll pass not just herders and cowboys but also Buddhist shrines. At Chokchai, sign up for the farm tour, the only way to see the entire operation.

Isan, the region where Pensuk is located, contains many legacies of the Khmer, the master builders who in the 12th century created the Angkor Wat temple in what is now Cambodia. Their most spectacular structures in Thailand include **Prasat Hin Phimai**, a towering 11th- and 12th-century Hindu/Buddhist temple of soft, pink-and-white sandstone, and **Prasat Phanom Rung**, which has Angkor-style sculptures and striking orange-and-pink reliefs.

For those interested in a tour of Thailand's northeast, try **North by North East** (north-by-north-east.com), the major tour operator specializing in Isan culture. The company leads four- and five-day guided excursions to the region.

Back in Bangkok, you can keep your cowboy vibe going at one of the city's many Western bars and steak houses. **Tawan Daeng**, which offers live music nightly, draws the biggest crowds (a map, with directions for a taxi driver, is at afana.org/tawan.htm). **Chokchai Steakhouse** has two branches in Bangkok (for their addresses, go to farmchokchai.com/en/steakhouse/03_location.asp), though the most-serious beef gourmands head to the **New York Steakhouse** at the JW Marriott Hotel, on Sukhumvit Soi 2.

burgers to the region, and the cowboy culture took hold. To the locals, the sun-baked cornfields of the northeast are kin to the decaying plains and mesas portrayed in Western films, and their traditional music—all jangly guitars and wailing songs of loss—could fit right in at a Tucson bar. Also, northeasterners can identify with the self-reliant cowboy ethos—the region has tried to secede from Thailand and was home to insurgents until just a few decades ago. And so in the past 10 years, Thai entrepreneurs, flush from the country's economic development, have been opening dude ranches and other Western knockoffs across the northeast. Yuttana Pensuk, a successful Thai businessman, started his ranch in 1995 as a personal homage to the American West, and later turned it into a commercial enterprise. It now hosts hundreds of guests, including a hefty number of foreigners, each year.

Having heard about Pensuk when I lived in Bangkok, during a recent trip back to the capital I decided to see it for myself. Driving out of the city, my friend and I soon left the strip malls behind and were traveling across open scrubland punctuated by stark, serrated limestone cliffs and tablelands. In the distance, occasional rice paddies cut into layered terraces that looked like huge green wedding cakes. Two hours out of Bangkok, cowboy bars, steak houses, and stalls selling fresh, sweet corn crowded the main highway. We turned onto a back road lined with small beef and dairy farms. Cowboys with creased faces, permanent squints, and mouths full of chew (narcotic betel nut instead of tobacco) were herding calves across the road and through the pastures. The occasional Buddhist temple rose incongruously on the horizon, its spires covered with pieces of colored glass that glittered like gems in the midday sun—virtually the only visible sign that this was the Far East, not the Wild West.

Thai tourists like to drive along these roads, going from farm to farm to sample the fresh yogurt and milk, and perhaps venturing off on a guided horseback

ride or settling in for an overnight stay. The region is famous for its hospitality; everywhere we stopped, strangers were eager to chat. On the recommendation of friends, we headed for Yana Farm, which sells goat's milk, goat's milk cheese, goat's milk ice cream, and even goat's milk shampoo, as well as organic fruit—fleshy chunks of papaya and cantaloupe with such a high sugar content that they feel like candy on the tongue.

Later, we pulled off the highway again at a strip of Western-style shops and bars. At the Texas Saloon, we ate inside a replica of a covered wagon, eavesdropping on the conversation of three Americans at a nearby table until our meals arrived—piquant *tom yam* soup and burgers spiced with local herbs. Then we moseyed next door to Buffalo Bill's, which advertises itself as the biggest seller of Western products in Thailand; indeed, we could barely walk without knocking over 1950s cowboy lunch boxes, shaggy buffalo heads, and current issues of *Western Horseman*. "I just like the laid-back Western lifestyle," one of the owners, a woman named Ing, told us. "It stands for freedom—that's what the northeast is like." Ing, who runs the store with her husband, said she lives for a cowboy gathering held in Denver each year.

We arrived at Pensuk in the late afternoon. The main drag looks like a spaghetti Western set, with "saloons" on either side of the road. Inside our room, in a fake storefront—the resort's guest rooms are set in faux saloons, teepees, even a county jail—nearly every available surface was covered with kaleidoscopic murals of mesas rendered in psychedelic colors and bizarre shapes; it was as if R. Crumb had channeled Georgia O'Keeffe. Even the bathroom had a Western motif: on the toilet seat, somewhat disconcertingly, was an eerie painting of a horse's head that seemed to be staring straight at me.

For the next couple of hours, I ambled around the resort, passing through rolling pastures and across drought-burned earth dotted with coconut palms, giant jungle ferns, and small clumps of bushes. Horses huddled in the shade of the palms,

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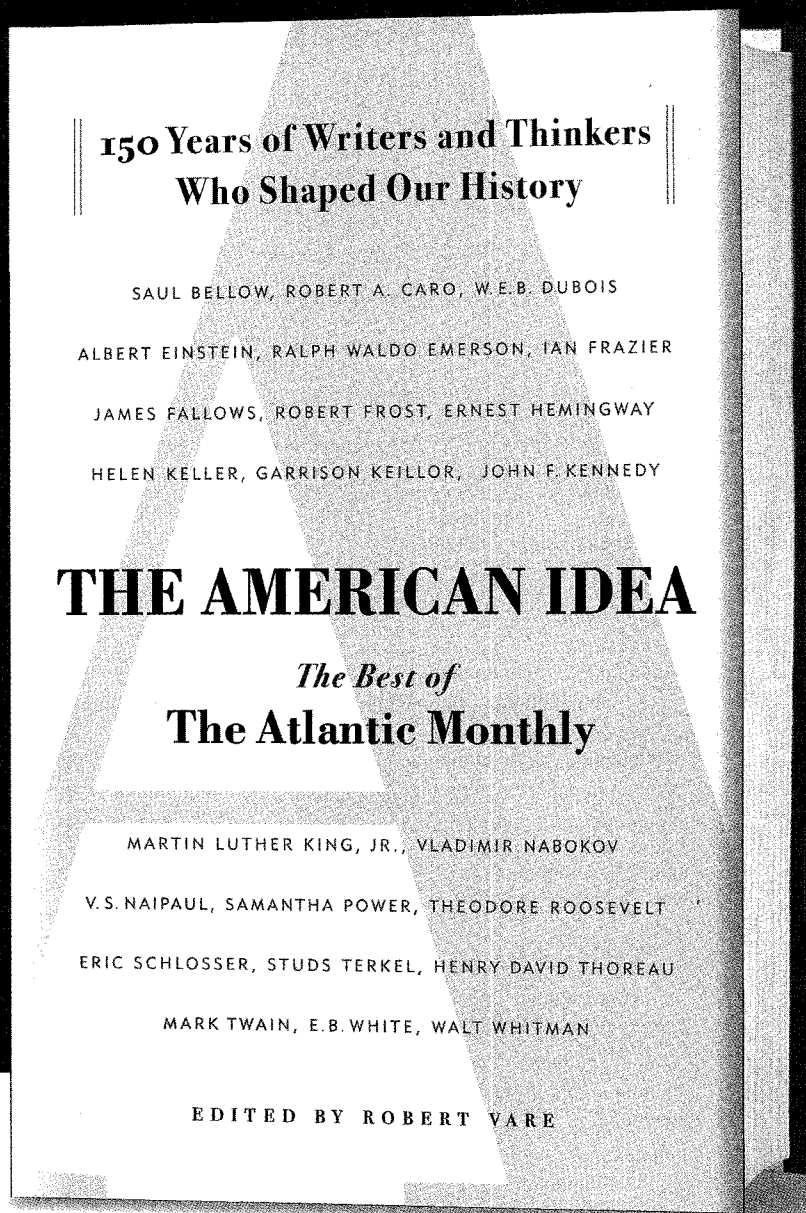
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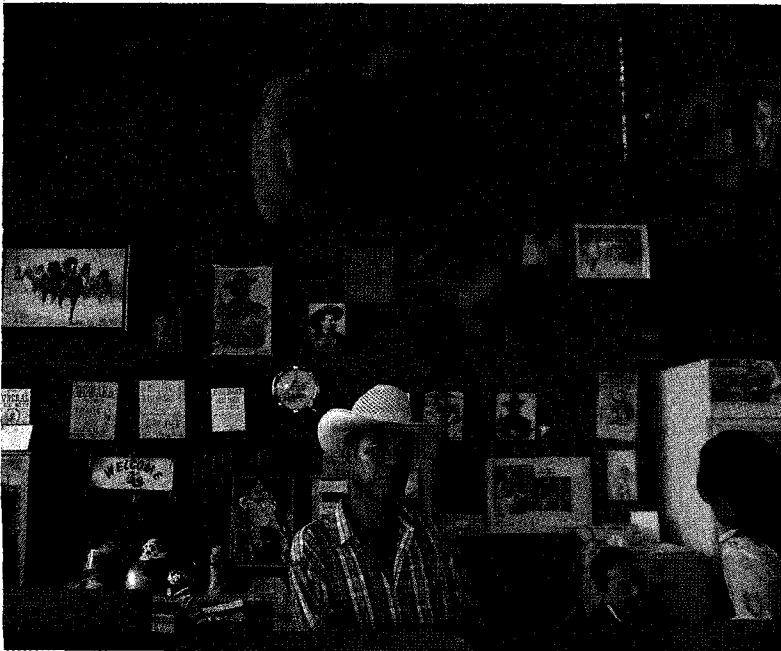


American experience

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HOME ON THE RANGE: The Pensuk resort boasts a thematically appropriate front desk and regular cowboy-and-Indian shows.

seeking refuge from the 95-degree heat. Thai children ran in circles around a teepee, whooping, while their parents peered inside and snapped pictures. Guests tested their skills at the archery range, and resort staff roasted a whole pig over a fire. A band in cowboy hats and flannel shirts played a strange, countrified Thai version of "Imagine." A lone peacock strutted and flashed his colors in one corner of the property, and a ranch hand led a horse carrying a boy in a 10-gallon hat around a field at a moderate trot. (Pensuk rents cowboy hats, in case you come unprepared.)

The following morning, I awoke early to pink sunlight filtering into my room. While the other guests slept, I hiked to the edge of the property. In the adjacent fields I could see crumbling spirit houses, their bases cluttered with offerings of fruit. I was reminded of the area's deep Buddhist roots and of temples I'd visited during earlier trips. In some parts of Southeast Asia, archaeological restorations of Buddhist monuments have resulted in Disney-esque structures. Not so in Thailand's northeast. Like the rugged landscape and creased cowboy faces, the ruins here look weathered; their imperfectly cut stones are bleached by the harsh sun and worn

smooth by monsoons and centuries of monks' footsteps.

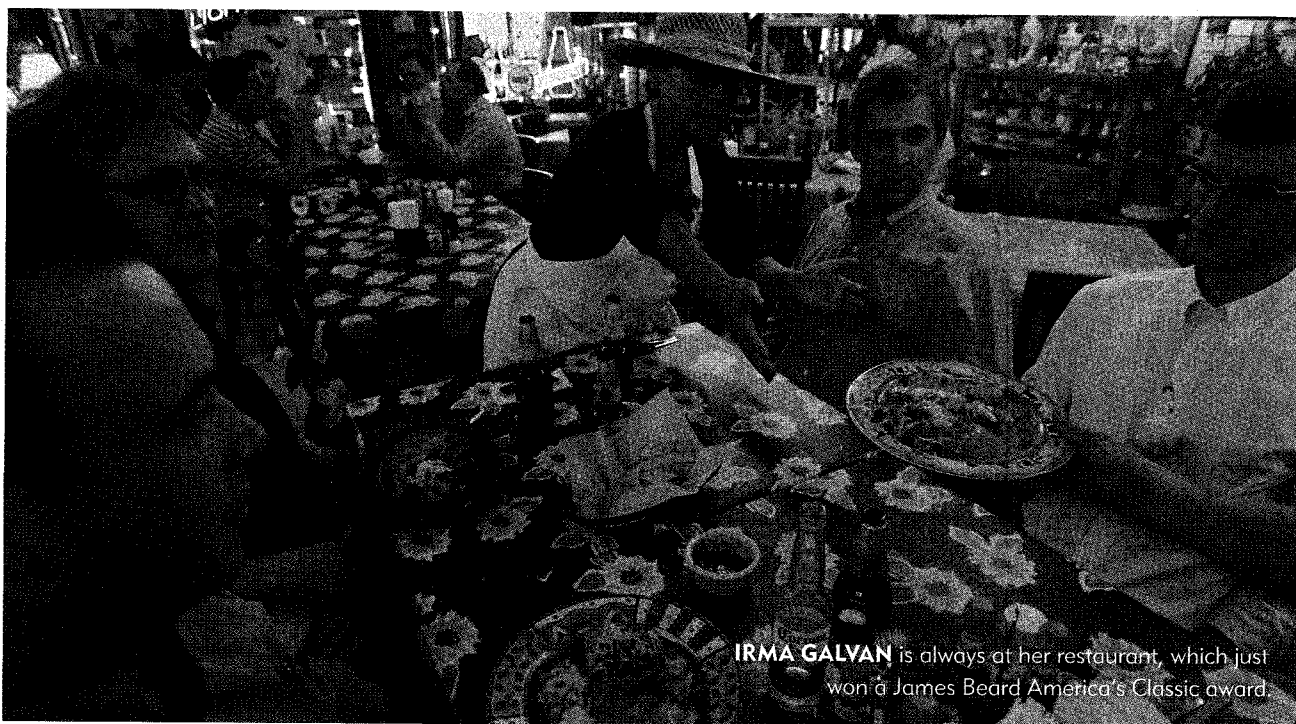
After my friend woke, we sat down to a Pensuk breakfast, an orgy of meat, and then headed to the nearby Farm Chokchai. With some 8,000 acres of wild grasses and sunflower fields, Chokchai is the biggest dairy farm in Southeast Asia. We signed up for the complete farm tour, which began with a viewing of grainy black-and-white footage of Chokchai cattle drives from the early 1960s. Next, a guide in jeans and a checked shirt led us from the milking station to a pen, where she provided an elaborate description of how to artificially inseminate a cow. Finally, we moved on to the stables, where farmhands were showing off their calf-roping and branding skills and giving riding lessons. "The cowboy life can be seen everywhere in Thailand," Choak Bulakul, the head of the Chokchai company, told me. "We are making it accessible to everyone."

A week later, back in Bangkok, I did suddenly notice signs of cowboys everywhere. Yuppies with trilling cell phones tore into gargantuan hunks of meat at Chokchai steak houses. The theaters were showing Thailand's own gay Western, a *Brokeback*-esque flick with the relationship played for laughs. Here

and there on the floor of the skyscraper canyons were cowboy bars where singers crooned odes to their women—and their water buffalo.

One evening I stopped in at Tawan Daeng, a cowboy bar on the northern outskirts of the capital. Young men and women dressed in flashy pants and skimpy dresses sat at long tables on three sides of a dance floor, downing huge amounts of cheap whiskey. The walls were hung with photos celebrating the northeast's greatest country singers, some of whom, like their American counterparts, died tragically young. A 10-piece band took the stage, belting out *mor lam*, electrified Thai country music with keening changes of pitch. Flanked by dancers dressed like American cheerleaders, the singer leaned forward and began weaving a long ballad about his woman, who—in fine country-western tradition—had left him for another man. Couples hit the dance floor, blending American-style square dancing with slow, classic Thai moves. The song ended with a wailing mouth-organ solo. The waiters brought another round of whiskey, and the singer took the mike again. ▀

Joshua Kurlantzick, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is the author of *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (2007).



IRMA GALVAN is always at her restaurant, which just won a James Beard America's Classic award.

FOOD

At Irma's in Houston, Mexican food is in the right hands—mothers' and grandmothers'.

Cooking for a Sunday Day

BY CORBY KUMMER

The best food, especially ethnic food, is made at home. All well and good to hear, but not so easy to find when traveling in a new country. Or a new town.

Irma's, an improbable mixture of politico hangout, tourist magnet, and kitsch extravaganza, is in Houston, but it serves home-style Mexican food of a freshness and quality hard to find on either side of the border. All the food is cooked by four or five Mexican mothers and grandmothers, using the skill bred into their hands and the kinds of modest tools and pots and pans you'd find in a Mexican home kitchen. The recipes are

their family specialties and those of Irma Galvan, who keeps a watchful eye on her cooks and on everyone who comes in and out of the place.

The food is a dream of how, say, tamales and enchiladas would taste if you were invited to a long, loud family lunch. It was mine, at least, and a reminder that in the right hands, usually women's, Mexico's is one of the world's great cuisines—sophisticated and subtle yet utterly satisfying. This month the James Beard Foundation gave the restaurant its America's Classic award; Irma's could soon become something of a national destination.

The chile rellenos were a particular surprise, with the look and delicacy of stuffed zucchini blossoms. The thin-walled fresh poblano peppers, first roasted and peeled, had the just-picked,

vegetal flavor of squash blossoms, and the filling of soft white chihuahua cheese and onions, one of three the restaurant offers, was not far from the usual ricotta-and-herb mixture with which Italian cooks stuff squash blossoms. Each filling (the other two are picadillo—ground meat cooked with tomatoes, onions, and garlic—and shredded chicken with fresh tomato sauce) is flavored with dried chiles and fresh herbs like cilantro and parsley. But none is terribly hot, so you can actually taste and appreciate the different chile powders. The frying in a delicate egg-white batter is so quick and skillful, it could be Japanese. I was transported.

Revelations like this are usually the result of the real simplicity that comes of long experience and long preparation. "It takes forever to make chile relleno,

MORE ON THEATLANTIC.COM
For a slideshow of Irma's restaurant, narrated by Corby Kummer, visit www.theatlantic.com/multimedia.

THOMAS SHEA

okay?" the owner told me when I asked how the cooks did it. "Like tamale"—the other dish Irma's redefined for me.

Irma's may serve home cooking, but it doesn't feel like home, or not like (probably) yours. The lively hodge-podge makes sense only when Galvan or her daughter, Monica, or son Tony, the two of her four children who work there, explains what's on the menu. They have to, because there isn't one. This keeps the feel as personal as the somewhat relentless decor, and is a shrewd businesswoman's way of warmly dodging the question of prices. Galvan charges a fair price for the labor that goes into those seemingly simple dishes—prices most people aren't used to paying for Mexican food.

Galvan didn't go into the restaurant business by choice. On New Year's Eve of 1981 her husband, Louis, a cancer researcher at Baylor, was murdered in a random mugging. He was 41 and Irma 39, and she became the sole support of their children, then aged 5 to 14. Friends had long urged her to open a restaurant: when she was growing up, in Brownsville and then Houston, she was the main cook for her two siblings (their mother, a single parent, worked), and Sundays were spent cooking with female relatives for an extended family that could number as many as 60.

I asked Galvan whether she considered the food she learned and now serves to be Tex-Mex or Mexican—a malleable distinction. She replied that she prefers to avoid the question by calling it "home-cooked authentic" or "authentic poor people's food." Her mother and most of her family came from Matehuala, a town between Guadalajara and Monterrey; the women she hires come from states such as Veracruz, which is renowned for its cuisine. She tells them to cook "like you cook for your family on a Sunday day," for occasions like "a wedding, a baptism."

Irma's is in an odd part of town, far from many of the city's trendy and expensive restaurants—the "Warehouse District," the kind of no-man's-land that real-estate brokers officially name when abandoned buildings get turned into

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—By Sarah Tucker

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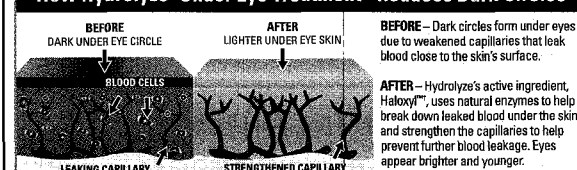
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lofts. Today it is a prime spot for a restaurant, a stone's throw from Minute Maid Park, home of the Astros, which opened in 2000. But it wasn't in 1989, when Galvan opened Irma's. She knew the neighborhood well, having worked across the street from the building for several years; she planned to cater to warehouse workers, and featured deli-style sandwiches. They didn't sell and she didn't like making them, so after a week she switched to delivering tacos to office workers in the nearby county courthouse, using pots and pans she carted from home.

The Mexican dishes caught on, and customers started coming in, eating at the one table, also carted from home, for

neighborhood improvement, and strongly supported the building of the stadium. (Galvan bought the building for \$25,000 in 1989; she kept adding on as business increased, and over the next decade she bought up the two square blocks around it.)

Galvan filled the dining rooms with antiques that took her fancy, and more or less anything else too. Mismatched shelves and glass cabinets display collections of plastic dolls, old typewriters and radios, neon beer signs, beer bottles, souvenir china, Christmas ornaments, and Mardi Gras beads. Wildly colorful floral oilcloths are the brightest reminders of Mexican folk art.

punch tasting more of strawberry, orange, and papaya than of lemon)—gestures perhaps acquired over a lifetime of compensating for low stature. Dishes arrive in a flash after she commands her small fleet of cooks to produce them. “She orders me around, too,” Alison Cook, a staunch loyalist from the beginning, admitted.

I kept asking for more napkin-lined baskets of handmade corn tortillas, made every morning and warmed to order (they are impossible to find in Boston, where I live, and hard enough to find even in Houston), which make every enchilada noteworthy. Most popular are tortillas rolled around spinach sautéed with garlic so quickly that the leaves, shiny



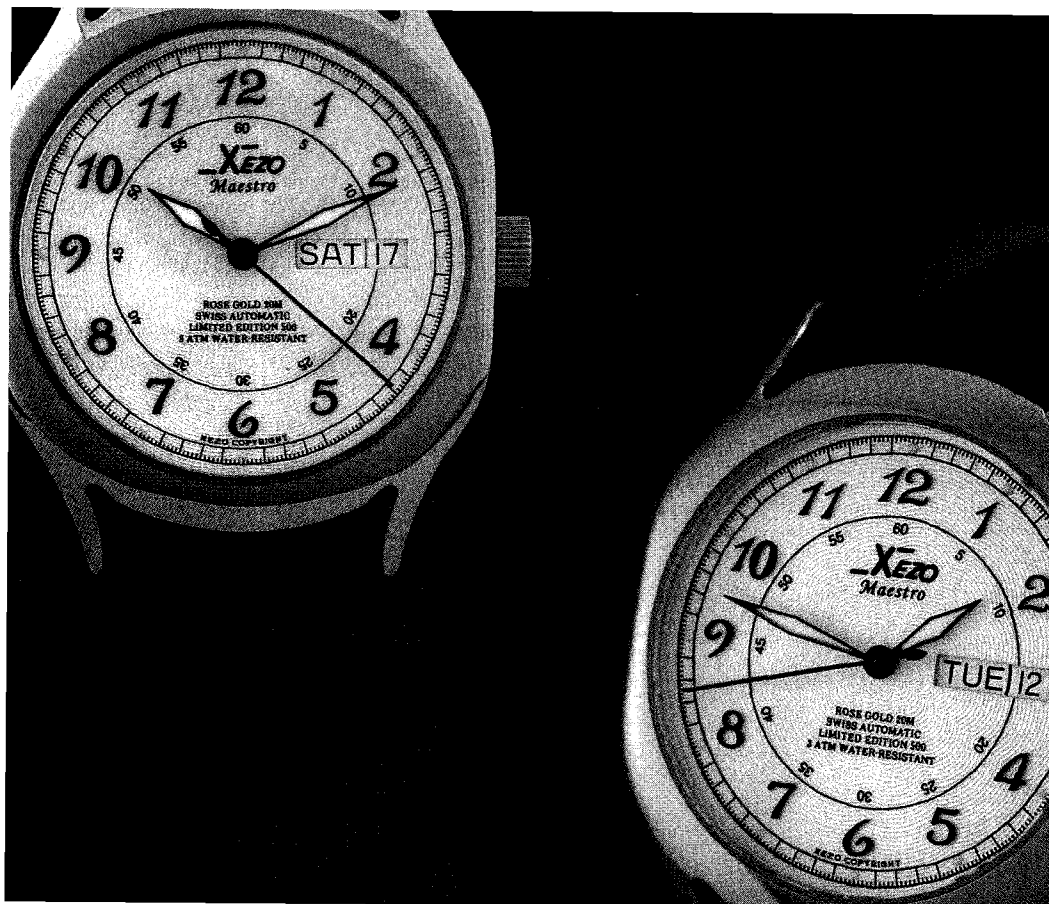
PUTTING THE KITSCH IN KITCHEN: Trinkets extravagantly fill the dining room; Mexican women mind the stove.

breakfast and lunch (even today, the restaurant, open only on weekdays, closes at 3, except on game nights, when it stays open until 7). For a while, all four children worked in the restaurant, and one son, Louis, opened his own, which he called Irma's Southwest Grill. As part of her innate loyalty-building strategy, Galvan taped up the business cards of seemingly everyone who ever came in, and glossies of every local figure and demi-celebrity she could talk into giving her one: today the 1970s walnut-look paneling is (mercifully) almost completely covered with them. Her natural hospitality won her a devoted political following. She was a frequent speaker at community hearings to encourage

But it is the food that made Irma's a local landmark and the reason I wanted to go back right away—despite having just taken vigorous part in a huge group lunch with a posse of national restaurant critics. We were there at the behest of Alison Cook, the critic for the *Houston Chronicle*, who had regaled us for years with tales of Irma's and of Irma. We immediately saw why. Galvan, who has the carriage of a dancer, waited on us, wearing her usual sweatshirt and boldly patterned tights (and, that day, combat boots). She bears plates over her head, and she stretches her arms out theatrically to get the attention of a whole table and signal waitresses to bring more of her signature lemonade (a tropical-fruit

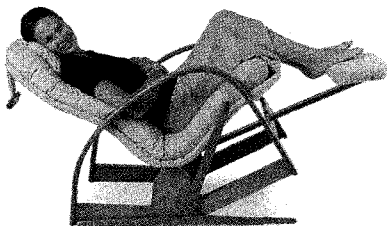
with olive oil, are barely wilted. They come in a fresh tomatillo sauce, yellow-green and lightly acidic and oniony, and topped with melted jalapeño jack cheese or mozzarella.

Galvan makes fresh flour tortillas, too, one of several Tex-Mex staples she did not grow up eating (“I called them gringo tortillas”) but has mastered anyway—like salsa and chips, which she never saw in a Mexican home or restaurant. Now salsa and chips come to the table, and both are predictably fresh: quick-fried chips from her own homemade tortillas, with bright-flavored salsa made daily. The guacamole, too, is made by hand, and meticulously; it draws people from all over Houston.



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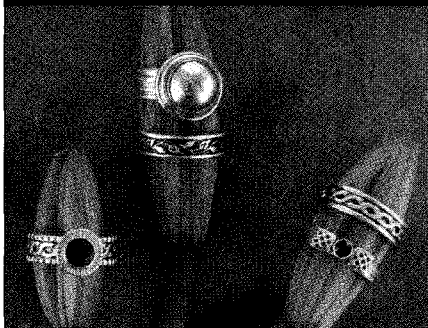
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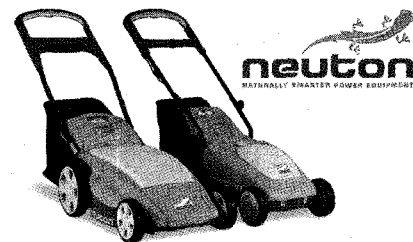


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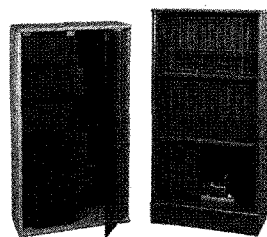
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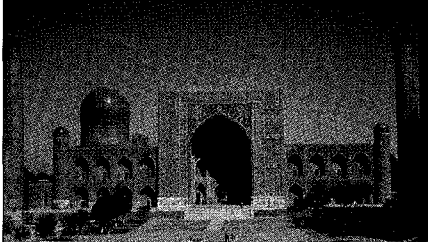


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As in all the best home cooking, small details make the dish—and in the best Mexican cooking, those require painstaking labor. For the tamale filling, cubed pork is simmered with whole heads of garlic and onions; the meat is hand-chopped and warmed with a “salsa”—really a thick paste of ancho (dried poblanos) and cascabel chiles, reconstituted and slowly sautéed with garlic and onions—until the moderate heat of the chiles permeates the meat. The masa, or white-cornmeal paste that goes into corn-husk wrappers along with the meat, is made with the garlicky stock from boiling the pork and softened with the secret ingredient too few Mexican cooks dare use but more of them should: *manteca*. “You don’t want to hear” what she uses, Galvan told me. Of course I did, and was extremely glad to hear the answer, “pure lard”—most cooks use insipid shortening. The texture is pillowy, the flavor deep and subtle.

We visited on a Thursday, the one day Irma’s offers homemade *tres leches* cake, which has recently become something of an obsession for sweets lovers, a group of which I am a proud member. For her recipe for “three milks,” which many jealous bakers would refuse to reveal, Galvan uses whole, Carnation evaporated, and Lechera-brand condensed milks. The wet, rich goodness comes from an overnight soaking of homemade white sponge cake with a mixture of the milks, and from an icing of *cajeta*, the caramelized milk that has become popular as *dulce de leche*, mixed with honey, cinnamon, and pecans. It sounds rich, and is, but tastes as airy as the whipped cream on top. That was sprayed from a can. It didn’t stop me from ordering a second portion.

I told Cook after lunch that I couldn’t imagine preferring another restaurant (and I did manage to sample a number of the others she recommended in town). She replied that Irma’s is the place she wishes she could go whenever she eats out, instead of a new restaurant—that place every food critic keeps in the back of her or his mind. If I lived in Houston, it would be mine too. ▀

Corby Kummer is an Atlantic senior editor.



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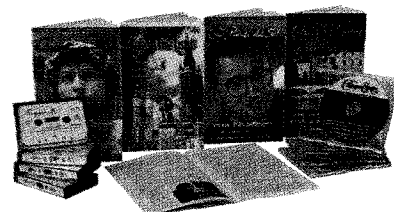
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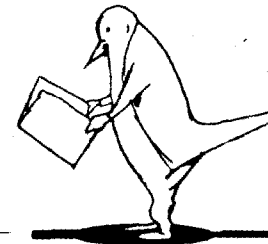
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AN63

WORD COURT

BY BARBARA WALLRAFF



KAREN WILHELM, of Alexandria, Va., writes, “As an Air Force officer with occasion to write strategic documents (although I’m recently retired), I was always fighting a losing battle over the plural of the term *weapon system*. To signify more than one such system, wouldn’t you say *weapon systems*? I’ve seen the term pluralized with any possible combination of added *s*’s—including *weapons system*—with the most common being *weapons systems*. I’d like to know the correct usage.”

You probably thought you were asking a simple question. But first we need to decide whether one of the things is actually a *weapon system*—or a *weapons system*. The Department of Defense, which buys the things, and Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, which make them, use both names on their Web sites, though references to a *weapon system* (and *weapon systems*) outnumber the alternative by a convincing but not overwhelming margin. However, the opposite is true of mentions in the press, and the preference for *weapons system* (and *weapons systems*) does become overwhelming in elite newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

I asked Merrill Perlman, the *New York Times* copy chief, about the thinking behind the paper’s choice. She told me, “For us, the logic is that most systems that employ weapons employ more than one—not just multiple weapons of the same type employed in different ways, but often different kinds of weapons as well—for example, radar and interceptors.”

If you go along with that, then we’re talking about *weapons systems*. If you’d rather follow the DOD’s lead, call them *weapon systems*. The only thing not to call more than one of them is *weapons system*.

JULIE HARDING, of Madison, N.J., writes, “I am a high-school English teacher and tend to be particular about proper usage, but I don’t like to correct people—especially parents. An expression that has been bothering

it’s standard but also because it makes sense. Granted, “There are *few between*” makes sense, too—but in that case, what is *far* supposed to be doing?

You’re also right, by the way, to hold yourself back from giving unsolicited advice about language. Just pretend you don’t notice the mistake and keep saying the phrase the correct way yourself.

EDWARD DOOGAN, of Philadelphia, writes, “I have a question about the term *UFO*. It is my understanding that the term refers to any object moving in the sky that the viewer is unable to identify—hence *unidentified flying object*. Now I hear many people use this term to refer to supposed alien aircraft. It drove me crazy when I heard a host on a National Public Radio show say that people in Texas thought they saw a *UFO*. She meant an alien craft, but she said *UFO*. By definition, they did see a *UFO*: it was flying in the sky and they couldn’t identify it. Am I right in my understanding of this term?”



me lately is *far and few between*. Until recently, I had always heard *few and far between*, as in ‘Good movies are *few and far between* these days.’ When I hear the same mistake often enough, I begin to doubt myself. What do you say?”

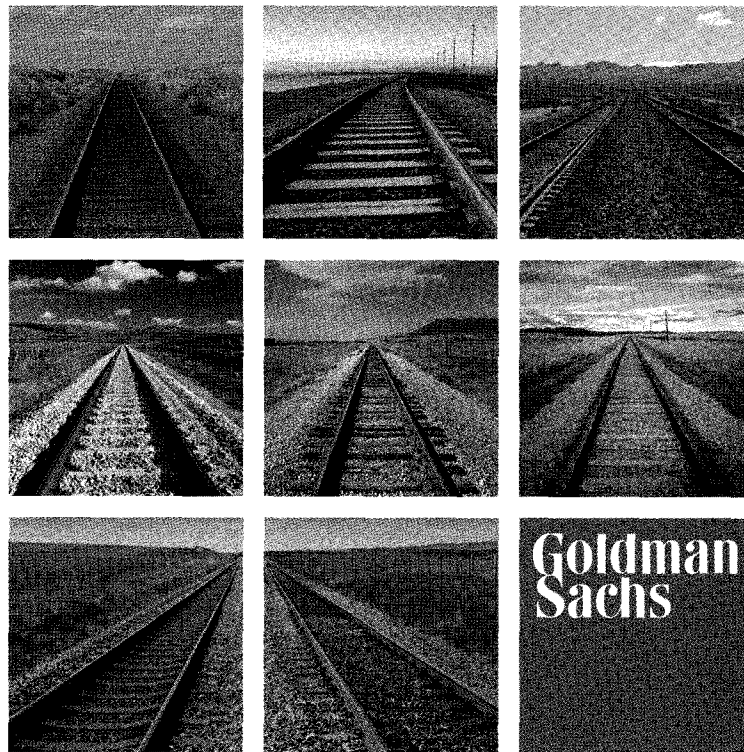
You’re right. The standard expression is definitely *few and far between*. It was already an established phrase by 1799, when the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell used it in “The Pleasures of Hope,” referring to “angel-visits.” The phrase is worth keeping straight not just because

You’re right about what the letters stand for, but I think you’re being too literal about what the abbreviation means. Is a *flying saucer* an actual saucer that flies? Is a *golden parachute* either golden or a parachute? *UFO* is a useful term that stops short of declaring that, yes, the thing is an alien spacecraft while leaving open the possibility that it might be one.

Do you have a language question or dispute? Write to Word Court in care of The Atlantic, P.O. Box 67375, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, or send e-mail to msgrammar@theatlantic.com. All letters become the property of Word Court. Ms. Grammar is also on the Web, at www.theatlantic.com/courtrecord.

GREG CLARKE

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15-Year Corporate Average Fuel Economy

Honda Average
30 mpg

Industry Average
25 mpg



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Over the past fifteen years, Honda has achieved the highest average fuel economy of any automaker. Which means our vehicles have emitted less CO₂—the primary cause of global warming—on average, than any other car company. All of which enhances our ultimate goal: a cleaner environment.

*Average sales-weighted fuel consumption for 1993–2007 model year passenger car and light truck fleets sold in the U.S. based on final CAFE reports through 2006 and 2007 mid-year reports. ©2008 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

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